


4: P.M.
Count





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4 p.m. Count
Yankton Federal Prison Camp
2008

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Yankton Federal Prison Camp

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Foreword

This year marks the 20th year of our AA Degree that Mount Marty College offers to the prisoners at Yankton Federal Prison Camp. Our beginnings were modest. We knew our goals were good ones that could only benefit the prisoners. Then we suffered through the loss of the Pell Grant money in the middle of the 1990's, but somehow we stayed with the mission of what we wanted to do. This educational partnership with the Federal Bureau of Prisons has gone beyond what we could have imagined. For this cooperation in such a vital and restorative process, I am grateful beyond words. Both the educational and administrative prison staff and our teaching personnel have watched with awe as the prisoners responded so well to the opportunity to do college work.

We had to keep in mind that these men have lots of baggage that is carried along as they do their courses. They all carry within them the pain of how deeply they have hurt and humiliated their parents and families, the destructive choices they made, the fear for their futures, of finding a job, and rebuilding relationships with loved ones. As time went on, they realize slowly that they are rebuilding something deep within them that had been crushed, beaten down, defeated. It was something that had died within them. This they slowly regain. We call it self-esteem, but my experience tells me that needs a better and stronger word to describe it. It is a place somewhere in the center of themselves that was once innocent, decent, sacred, holy. Slowly they feel that returning. To a person, somewhere in their studying, they all speak or write about the restoration of what was once good within them. A rejuvenation of that inward sense of wholeness and integrity is gradually built up. Because of that, they rediscover a confidence and courage that assure them of that future job, those reestablished relationships, the strength for good choices.

The publishing of this book is another landmark of

what a strong educational process can do. Herein we find all the heart, soul, and mind of good men who worked hard in response to their inner resources. The inner workings of these men have seen troubled and very painful times. They recognize the power of that suffering and thus offer us the wisdom that comes from that very suffering.

Personally I am very proud of what they have done for this book. My everyday prayer for them is that goodness and kindness will follow them all the days of their lives.

Sister Cynthia Binder
Associate Professor of Humanities
Mount Marty College
Yankton, South Dakota
June 2008

Introduction

Yesterday we put the table of contents of this journal together in prison. Today I'm sitting in my office, looking at the group photo of all the authors you will find in this inaugural publication of *4 P.M. Count*—Yankton Federal Prison Camp's creative writing journal. The pride on the guys' faces tells me a lot. If we'd taken this photo six months ago, we would have all looked like deer in headlights—me probably more so than the rest. I had a plan, and I can honestly tell you we've accomplished all of the things I hoped to—what I envisioned these guys could achieve.

I didn't know a lot about where I was going to be working every Tuesday for the next eight months. I knew the Yankton Federal Prison Camp was the only Federal Prison in the nation without a barbed-wire fence. I knew there weren't any second chances given to inmates. I had heard most of the men there were incarcerated for drug-related or white-collar crimes. What I learned was that inmates at YFPC could obtain an Associate Degree from Mount Marty College in business or horticulture if they had graduated from high school or obtained their GED while in prison.

When I came to the camp I was immediately impressed—the place is immaculate. Beautiful flowers and landscape—the men take pride in making the place look as good as possible—it is their home away from home for now. I was still hesitant though, because I was entering into a world I wasn't quite sure about—which in turn made my teaching all the more rewarding. From the beginning I told the guys I wasn't interested in their past—rather, I was interested in their future and the goals they had for themselves and, most importantly, for their writing.

During our first three-hour session one of the guys asked me what the difference between poems and prose was. I threw out my plan and realized we had to start at the beginning. From there I established a crash course in writ-

ing—realizing I had some very talented students from the get-go and some students that were eager to learn. What a rewarding environment that is. Students that want to learn. I knew they would show up for class each week and to my surprise they not only were there, but they had their homework done and stories and poems ready to workshop. As a teacher, I was truly moved by the eagerness—their raw nerve and inimitable voices.

As in any workshop setting, constructive criticism is tough to implement. These men, their teacher included, are competitive. On some occasions we all disagreed—which in turn made my teaching (I hope) and their work (I know), better. I'd be lying to you if I told you I wasn't intimidated at times, but that's par for the course. What all of us learned was that each week we could walk away from workshop and think about our discussions, our criticisms, our suggestions and take 'em or leave 'em.

The funding from the NEA allowed me to invite other writers from throughout the country to join us so that the students could get a wide array of opinions and ideas on craft. These award-winning writers helped workshop and wrote response letters back to us, which you will find in this journal.

This journal you are holding in your hands is proof that a weekly writing and publishing class can unlock a world of potential—one that can provide the tools for personal growth and prosperity. Programs like these, funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, give these guys hope—give them something to share with family and friends and make them richer for the show. I do hope such programs continue throughout the country.

Jim Reese
Yankton, SD
August, 2008

4 P.M. Count

Group poem

Lights on.

Doors open.

Stand up it's count time.

Hats and headphones off.

I reminisce of my mother preparing
to go grocery shopping. Looking in the fridge
Her list in hand, *We need eggs, milk, bacon....*

Time to make sure all the cattle are accounted for.
Where are we going to go?

Red light flash—stand up fast.
Count by number—no time to slumber.

*Recount! Bed book count...Listen for your name and
respond with your number. Say nothing but your
registered number. Nothing else!*

Hundreds of thousands of Federal Inmates being counted
across the nation.

4 P.M. Count one more time—one less count—
one less day.

A daily reminder of humility. Here, we are all just
a number.

Coffee time.

Another day is put behind us—time to relax—
time to unwind.

It's almost mail call. Will I be lucky today? Has someone

thought about me? Who's first? A-H? S-Z? Man, this crap is getting old.

What is so hard about counting? Really how hard can it be?

I'm trying to watch this game!

Nap time.

A cool—too fresh—slap in the face.

Get this over so I can go to chow.

Fifty-six! Fifty-seven!

I got fifty-six.

Recount. This time stand where we can see you!

ROOTS

Be a Man

Isaac Searcy

A cow's horns can become dangerous not only to humans, but to other cows. They can get their horns hung up in a gate, or even inadvertently poke another cow's eye out. Because of this, their horns need to be removed when the cattle are young and the horns very small. One method used to remove the horns is to burn them off. It is the least expensive and also, least time consuming—something dairy farmers have little of. The tool used to remove the horns is shaped like a curling iron used by women to curl their hair. The iron is electric and heats up to a red-hot temperature. After a young calf is secured in a head-gate—equipment that secures the calf's head and will not allow the calf to move—the iron is pressed over the horn and held for a full twenty seconds, burning out the source of the horn's growth, the root.

When the eyes of them black and white calves roll back until I can see the white in them, I cringe, and it hurts in the spot where a man don't let no one else see. Grandpa says we have to de-horn the calves or their horns will be a nuisance, and I can understand that. He says we have to burn 'em off because it cost too much to do surgery, and I can understand that, too. But I don't understand the pain in my chest, twisting my insides up when that searing hot iron touches the calf's horn and she bawls and bellers and it strikes a chord deep down inside me. Grandpa presses down with the iron and the muscles and veins of his scarred and leathered forearms ripple. He looks right into my eyes through the smoke of burnt horn and flesh billowing up around us, and his face says what his lips won't. "Be a man Isaac. This is business."

Arkansawing for Asparagus

Jason E. Davis

Dad and Bubba Bean
sitting on the hood of the 86' Chevy Caprice
moving at a snail's pace
down the gravel road
searching for wild asparagus.
Stopping to reload on more *Bud Lights*
waving to Sheriff Kline as he
drives by, nods and looks the other way.

The Squirrels' Nest

Scott Kirk

A cozy corner hangout, checkered black-and-white floor tiles.

A digital CD jukebox blaring Hank Williams Jr.

The smell of stale empty beer cans.

Foosball players hollering, as the ball slams into the hole.

Suntanned farmers belly up to the bar.

Harley Davidson motorcycles coming and going, living to ride.

The family collie, racing in and out of the patio door.

A beautiful bartender serving drinks from behind an oak-topped bar

The ringing of an old cash register, as a round of Quervo is bought.

Pool balls breaking, as the cue ball falls into the hole.

Cooler doors sliding open, sliding closed.

Bell ringing on the door, as patrons enter and exit.

Cheer and excitement of customers, as the alcohol takes effect.

My mother and step-father playing host to the regulars.

The beeping of the dartboard, as a dart is thrown, a game is won.

A warm breeze blowing, while hanging out on the deck.

Daydreaming about memorable times, here, at Shirley's Squirrels' Nest.

Now, the windows are broken, no neon lights to be found.

The doors boarded up, while the deck sags to the ground

The parking lot covered in knee-high weeds—a ghost town.

The cracked sign hangs askew, threatening to fall.

Inside, all billiard games, long ago removed.

The cool-looking tile, now brown and water stained.
Old trash, broken glass covering the floor.

All in the past, never to exist again.
Sad country music, playing only in my head.
All reduced to rubble—
four paved lanes lie in its wake.



25 February 2008

To the Yankton Writing and Publishing Class

Thanks for the letters; it's good to hear from you guys. And thanks for your thoughts and appreciation for the time we spent together in your class on the 12th. It was a pleasure to meet you all and spend some time talking about writing, and I really enjoyed the chance to read a few things there. You guys are a great audience.

I noted several letters referring to our talk about dreams and the subconscious, and I think that's an important area for writers to explore. Creative writing takes a person into an imaginative state that seems to me very similar to the state of dreaming. The only difference I see is that the imagination often seems more under conscious control, but that's not always true. Sometimes a writer gets so caught up in a story that when he finishes it, it's like waking up from a dream—he can't remember what he just wrote—like when you wake from a dream you know you had but you can't recall. Other dreams are unforgettable and worth exploring in writing. I'd be interested in seeing yours, Dane.

Some people believe dreams and writing come from the same place in the subconscious. And I think that's probably true, but only when the writing can somehow bypass the tight control of the conscious ego. It's like the ego just wants to tell what it already knows, because it fears the unknown. And so the ego tries to censor anything new and different that tries to rise from the subconscious and enter the writing, because the ego doesn't already have a comfortable understanding of it. But the things the ego is so intent on censoring are the very things the subconscious wants to explore, the new creations that can lift a story out of the ego's old comfortable but boring ruts.

So in that sense, Ryan, I often have an idea about how to

begin a story, or maybe an idea about ending it, but I don't outline it too tightly, because I want the story to take me wherever it wants to go instead of me holding it back. If I let the story lead me past the ego and into the subconscious, the story can teach me things I don't already consciously know. It's like the letters you guys sent. They bring up things I haven't consciously thought about before. Instead of saying, "I don't know," if I let my mind go and at least try to answer, I begin to learn things I wasn't consciously aware of before. They might not be the most accurate answers for anyone else, but they tell me how I see things right now. My answers might change as I continue to learn in the future, but right now they're what I believe. So your letters offer me the opportunity to find out what I think about these things right now, and give me the opportunity to learn some things I don't already consciously know. And that's what education is really all about. So I thank you guys for challenging me with your questions, giving me an opportunity to learn some things here.

It's often one of the most difficult things about writing—finding a way to get past the fearful censorship of the ego. But I think it's important, because as the subconscious opens new avenues for creation in writing, it also seems to open new avenues for learning in the writer. And I think we need to discover those subconscious parts of our stories and of ourselves in order to become the writers and human beings we're capable of becoming. So I guess for me, Joshua, writing *is* an attempt to find understanding and purpose in life, and reading is another way of attempting that. And Mario, I guess that's how I view writing, as an *attempt* to create something meaningful, though the meaning may vary with the person. We really can't control the meaning others might find in what we create. I think that whether we're writing or reading, when we're working with words it's like holding up a mirror that shows us some of the deeper parts of ourselves. And if we're learning and growing, we're changing, and what we see in the mirror

is bound to change too. Some of those old Bible stories I read years ago mean very different things to me today. The same words, but deeper meanings.

You bring up a good question, Justin, about how to describe a character or a place while writing about an event. I'd say, try to tie it in naturally somehow instead of separating it from the rest of the story in a paragraph of its own. Describe a bit of the character while he/she is performing some action in a scene, or describe a bit of the setting while some action or another is taking place in it. Just work to tie it in as naturally as you can.

About details, Brandon, I'd say they should always seem a necessary part of the story or poem, something important to the scene you're creating. A certain amount of background always seems necessary to create a setting for whatever scene you're presenting. And I like your idea, Isaac, of trying to keep things fun for the reader and for yourself, and I'm glad to hear you're giving poetry a shot. It sounds like you're putting together a collection, Michael, and revision is always ongoing. I'd say the next step is to get some practice at presenting your poems aloud in the class and try to line up a reading where you can present your work, maybe at a local library or bookstore when you get out.

I really liked the place names you mentioned in your letter, Jason: *Ketchum Bridge* and *Skunk River*. It sounds like a great place to write about. When you finish *Man and His Symbols*, Lee, you might want to check out some of Joseph Campbell's writings about myth; one I remember is titled *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. And you're right about the creativity in dreams, Joe; see what kind of writing ideas they can give you.

I feel fortunate to have been able to share a class with you guys, Juan. It sounds like you've got a lot to write

about you and your brother growing up together. And I'm glad you enjoyed the poems, Josh. Scott, thanks for the kind words. And Hung, I appreciate your thoughts on my reading there. I really enjoyed visiting and working with you guys, and the letters you wrote got me to thinking, which got me to learning. So my thanks to all of you as well. And I hope something in this letter is helpful for each of you in some way. For me, whether I'm reading or writing, it's like holding up a mirror. Words bring up thoughts from my subconscious, and show me something about myself.

Jim, thanks for the invitation. I really enjoyed the visit and hope it was helpful for the class. You've got a great group there. Maybe we can get together again some time.

Thanks again to all you guys. And best of luck in the class and in the future.

You all take care,

Neil Harrison

Momma's Holiday

Mario G. Covington

“Boy, cut those onions smaller than that!” That’s what momma would say as she prepared Thanksgiving dinner. “Hurry up, there’s still bell peppers and cabbage to be cut.” Yep, that was me and momma’s holiday act. Every holiday she cooked, I was the prep cook. I didn’t enjoy getting up at five-thirty in the morning, cutting onions; crying like someone who has just won the lottery, but I enjoyed watching momma prepare holiday meals, and I learned to appreciate this time that mom and I spent together because this was a time that I didn’t have to share momma with anyone.

Momma is a buxom woman from the South, Memphis, Tennessee, and she stands about five feet, six inches tall. She has a chestnut complexion, and when she smiles she lights up the whole room. But she also has a frown that will chase the sun behind the clouds. Overall, momma is a beautiful, caring, and loving woman who cares for her family.

I’m the oldest boy of four children—two boys and two girls. I’ve been helping momma in the kitchen since I was eight years old. I once asked her, “Why isn’t Rachel—my oldest sister—required to help in the kitchen?” She said, “Son, your sister doesn’t have a clue about cutting vegetables.” This made me feel good, knowing that momma chose me to be her dicer. It’s now been three years since I’ve been helping momma in the kitchen and I’ve gotten pretty good at cutting and dicing fruits and vegetables.

It’s a tradition in my family that every head of a household host a holiday at their homes. This isn’t something that was voted on; it’s just something that my family has inherited over the years. I think it was unconsciously started by my grandmother. At the beginning of the year four aunts and an uncle would choose his or

her holiday. I had a fairly large family: momma had four children, my aunts had seven children between them, and my uncle had two children. So there were thirteen children and eleven grown-ups, which included grandma and her two brothers and their wives.

This particular year momma chose Thanksgiving as her holiday. She always became agitated when it was her time to host, maybe because she wanted everything to be perfect. And since I was her helper, I was the one that received most of the agitation. Everything I did was too slow, or not good enough, but I survived. When the family arrived, everything was to momma's liking, and I could tell because momma would light up the room with that electric smile.

Momma had the table packed with food and she wouldn't relax until everything was done to her liking. She would say, "Son, one day it will be your turn to serve dinner for the family." I said, "Momma, I can't do this. Look at all of this food you made; I can't even cook!" Momma said, with that mesmerizing smile, "Sure you can, and you will. I've been up since three in the morning preparing dinner for the family. I made candied yams, macaroni and cheese, cabbage, green beans, greens, potato salad, deviled eggs, mashed potatoes, gravy with chicken gizzards in it, ham, turkey and dressing, and chitterlings." Momma made everything from scratch. She would keep the leftover corn bread in the freezer for at least a year, and then she would make dressing out of it to go with the turkey. Boy was it delicious! The dressing was my favorite food that momma made for the holiday. I remember looking at momma with a sense a pride, joy, and admiration, like looking at someone who had saved a person's life. I was brought out of my thoughts by momma's haughty voice. She said, "For dessert I made a chocolate cake, a coconut cake, eight sweet potato pies, six lemon meringue pies, two banana puddings, and two peach cobblers." All of these pastries were made from scratch as well.

Momma said that down South is where the real

cooks come from. Out of all of her desserts, momma's chocolate cake was my favorite. I received one of these tasty chocolate cakes every birthday, and I wasn't required to share it with anyone! The lemon meringue pies were the family favorites. Momma couldn't make enough of these pies; it was always the first dessert to disappear. She would always say to me, "Put one of those pies away until the family leaves." I always said when I got older I would put these pies on the market, that's how good they were.

After the family finished eating, we would all spread our wings: my uncles would be watching the Cowboys football game, us kids would be playing Atari, or some board game, and momma and the rest of the grown-ups would be dancing to music by the O'Jays, or the Temptations. That was the great thing about momma; she loved to see her family happy. She loved to have her family together, happy, and having fun.

When the holiday was over, my sister and I were left with the challenge of cleaning the kitchen. Most of the family members took leftovers home so there wasn't much food left. But that's okay, we'll do the same thing at Uncle Lewis' house for Christmas, and me, well I can't wait until next year for "Momma's Holiday!"

“Dat Der” Rope

Ryan Nordstrom

When I was nine, my dad and I went to my grandpa's farm as we had done for as long as I could remember. In front of his house he had converted some old 500-gallon water tanks to hold his baby calves. He always liked to keep an extra special eye on them. That day he said one of 'em was getting too big so we had to take her down to the farm. He handed me the rope and said, "Whatever you do boy, don't let go of dat rope." I held on tight to that rope; my pride for my grandpa's respect clamped my fingers tighter than a rusted pickle jar. Grandpa and dad walked behind, I turned my head, a shit eating grin spread across my face, shining, at their glowing approval. The loud beller announced the sudden shift in my world as the calf spooked. Its muscular legs pumped like the pistons in a diesel truck, mine straighter than a first time skier slaloming across the gravel road until I tumbled, face forward, dragged across the gravel, pulled behind the jack hammering hooves, ignorant, to the shouts of "Boy, let go, let go of the rope!" echoing from the duet of running feet behind me. My fingers slipped, the rope scraped along my soft city hands until the last thread was beyond my grasp. Tears flowed as the calf ran on. Grandpa and dad approached, questioned if I was all right, but all I could do was cry because I had let go of dat der rope.

Neumyer Trailer Park Shoot Out

Justin Brooks

My brother and I banded together like only brothers could this one hot, summer day in Oklahoma. Josh and I were trailer park raised in Yukon, Oklahoma. We look a lot alike, even to this day, except Josh has always been a few inches shorter than I: brown hair, blue eyes, scrawny like our dad but have our mother's good looks. Our birthdays are only 363 days apart, Josh being younger, so we have had our share of knock-down-drag-outs, but he is my best friend.

We lived in a three bedroom trailer that was brand-spanking-new, and we were lot number one out of three-hundred. We sure thought we were something. Mom and Dad had recently switched our rooms because we had too much stuff. Our room was the master bedroom and bath with a walk-in closet, stand-up shower stall, and a bathtub that I could still lie down in. This trailer was actually a little piece of heaven in mobile home terms. Josh and I did have separate beds but had to share everything else like toys, clothes, and friends; mainly Josh would wear my clothes, and I would beat him up for it, even though they didn't fit me any more.

Willy was a boy that lived on our end of the trailer park. He was either staying the night with us, or we with him. We were very afraid of Willy's mom, Almeda. She is kind of a big woman but very pretty with her dark complexion and long black hair. Every kid in the park knew she was the toughest mom around. During the hot Oklahoma summers, Almeda went barefoot everywhere. I remember one summer, Willy, Josh, and I cracked an egg on the pavement, and it actually started cooking. While we were spell-bound by the frying egg, Almeda walked up and said, "What are you boys doin'?" She was standing on that pavement without any shoes on, and it didn't even bother her!

Willy, Josh, and I were all such good friends because of Oklahoma Sooner football and the 80's rock bands we listened to. When the other park kids were blaring Michael Jackson, we were head-banging to the likes of Quiet Riot and Motley Crue. Our hero was Brian Bosworth before the whole steroid scandal at Oklahoma University. All three of us even sported the Bosworth mullet with shaved lines on the side of our heads; we wore cut-off jean shorts and those crazy half shirts all summer long. We were truly different from the other kids.

Josh and I were paid an allowance by our folks every week; we had to do chores like take out the trash, rake and mow the yard, and clean our room. I would always blow my money on candy and such, but Josh always saved his money. When Josh was nine, this blonde, over-weight lady named Carol that lived down the street sold him a Daisy pump action pellet gun. She was having some kind of yard sale when Josh walked up and inquired about the gun. Carol said, "Young man, you can't buy that unless I speak to your parents."

Josh replied, "Ma'am, my dad is home right now. You can call him if you wanna."

Carol called the number Josh gave her, and Willy answered the phone in his deepest voice, "Hello?"

Carol replied, "I have your son over here at my trailer tryin' to buy a gun. Is that okay?"

Willy says, "You mean Joshua? Yeah, sure. We already talked about it." That was all she needed and she sold it to Josh. He was soon on his way back with the Daisy pump action pellet gun.

Josh, Willy, and I didn't have one clue about pellet guns. We just thought you pumped it up, pointed it, and shot, which is true, but we didn't have any pellets. There was no way we could ask our parents to get some; we weren't even supposed to have it in the first place. All we did with it was pump it up and shoot the air at ant hills and other bugs.

All of the kids in the trailer park knew that we

had this pellet gun. One kid, Howard—we called him Howeird—was absolutely fascinated with it. We didn't really like him very much, but he was always trying to fit into our tightly knit group. I didn't like him because he lived on the other side of the trailer park, wore glasses, and didn't even like rock and roll; just typical kid stuff.

It was really hot one afternoon, so Josh and I were hanging out in our room. Mom and Dad were at work, so Josh and I were the only ones home, and Willy came by. He was our only friend that was allowed over without our folks being home. Willy started shooting the pellet gun at the various action figures that littered our room. He must have shot it twenty times before Howeird came walking into the room. Howeird said, "What are y'all doin'?"

Josh and I were playing Atari, Motley Crue was screaming "I'm a live wire," and Willy pointed the gun at Howeird and said, "Say good night, Howeird."

Howeird was still standing at the door when Willy pulled the trigger, and Howeird's hands immediately flew up to his forehead. He said, "I'm hit! You shot me!"

We started laughing because we thought he was just joking around. He sure made it look real, and I was fairly impressed. After the moment passed when things stop being funny, he was still slightly bent over holding his head. When Howeird pulled his hands away, they were covered in blood. There was so much blood. Willy, Josh, and I said a few choice words in unison which young boys should not be saying. Apparently there had been a pellet stuck in the chamber the entire time.

Willy and I rushed Howeird to the bathroom sink for a closer inspection while Josh hid the Daisy pump action pellet gun in our super-secret-hiding-spot (the bottom of our toy box). Willy wetted a washcloth and wiped Howeird's blood away from the wound. I was starting to come up with some kind of plan to tell our parents: he got beat up, fell out of a tree, something! This plan fell apart after inspecting the wound. The pellet must have turned side-ways in mid-air when it hit Howeird and left a perfect,

hour glass cut right between his eyes. It was such a great shot that I secretly wanted to give Willy a high-five.

After we got the bleeding to stop, Willy put two small band-aids in the shape of an “X” on Howeird’s head. Josh said, “You’ve gotta go home, Howeird, and you can’t tell your folks you were here. I don’t know what you will tell ’em, but you weren’t here.” Poor Howeird got kicked out of our house, having to walk to the other end of the trailer park, carrying his skateboard and pushing his bike. He wanted to call his mom for a ride, but we wouldn’t let him.

Mom had put this off-white, shag throw rug in front of the vanity in our bathroom. That is exactly where Howeird was standing and there was quite a bit of blood on it. Willy, Josh, and I started pouring shampoo, toothpaste, Comet, pretty much whatever cleaning agent we could find on the blood stains and started scrubbing, but they would not come out. We were only ten years old, including Howeird, except Josh was nine, but we were more worried about Mom finding out than the well-being of Howeird. I ended up taking the rug down the street and throwing it into someone’s dumpster.

On my way back to the trailer, Mom pulled up and said, “Hop in honey.” My mind started reeling as I climbed into the car. Hopefully Josh and Willy were ready for my mom to be there. I was about to start freaking out.

Mom pulled up to the trailer, and we got out of the car. I could see Carol digging in her dumpster to see what I had thrown in there. Boy was she in for a shocker. It didn’t even enter my little mind that she would be down to talk to Mom.

Every day when Mom got home from work, she would give Josh and me a hug and ask about our day at school. She went straight to our room to talk to Josh and noticed the rug was gone. She asked, “What happened to that rug?”

I, being the genius that I am, said, “What rug, Ma?”
She replied, “The bathroom rug?”

Off of the top of my head, without any kind of rehearsal, I told her, "I'm sorry Ma, but I spilt Kool-Aid on it and throwed it out."

She said, "Well, go and get it out of the trash, and I will get the stain out."

Willy, Josh, and I were near fainting when there was a knock at the front door, and Mom went to answer it. A few seconds later, Mom yelled, "Boys! Get out here. Now!"

We didn't know what to do and moved down the hall like a slow moving pack of wild dogs looking for the dog catcher. I wanted to yell RUN! We could almost make out the conversation between Mom and Carol, and she was showing Mom the rug and saying, "This looks like blood, Karen."

Mom asked me, "Justin, do you want to tell me what really happened?"

I couldn't speak! Josh saved me by coming up with the best lie I have ever heard. He said, "Howeird and I were boxing, with the gloves on, and I bloodied his nose. We didn't want to get into trouble."

Halfway through Josh's wonderful moment, Willy nudged me which made me realize Howeird and his mom had just stepped up on the front porch.

Howeird still had his crude band-aids on, and his mom looked furious. She was a heavy-set woman that always wore a bright yellow T-shirt. Her short, curly brown hair and huge glasses let people know she was a force to be reckoned with. Her face was beet red with anger, and the first words out of her mouth were, "Karen, did you know my boy's 'lergic to lead? What kind of ship are you sailin' down here?" She said it in the most accented Oklahoma drawl a person could ever have. Carol quietly put the rug down and left.

Mom was still clueless as to what was really going on, but Howeird's mom sure filled her in. Howeird told his mom everything! I couldn't believe it. Boy, was he going to get it at the bus stop in the morning. Howeird and his mom finally left after Mom assured her that the pellets were

not lead (even though she did not know for sure), and she would handle it from here.

After Mom closed the door, she said, “Get that B.B. gun. Now!”

Without even thinking, I replied, “What B.B. gun, Ma?” Apparently that is the wrong thing to say to any mom, especially after some kid just got shot between the eyes.

Mom has always been very understanding when Josh and I would get into trouble, which happened a lot. I think she even laughed, behind closed doors, at some of our antics and outlandish childish lies. This time, she freaked out. She said, “I SAID! Where...Is...The...B.B...Gun...?”

I didn’t want to say anything because I knew I would only say another lie. Luckily, Josh spoke up and said, “I’ll go and get it, Ma.”

While Josh was getting the pellet gun, Mom called Willy’s mom. When Mom got off of the phone, it seemed like only seconds passed before Almeda walked through the front door. She gave us that disappointed look that all mothers have and said, “You boys are not allowed to hang out with each other for a week. The only time you can see each other is at the bus stop and in school.” She meant it too.

Mom asked, “Where did you boys get that B.B. gun?”

I wanted to explain to her that it wasn’t just some ordinary B.B. gun, it was a .177 caliber, 400 feet per second, Daisy-pump-action-pellet-gun; this was the cream of the crop when it come to little boys and pellet guns, but I didn’t think it would be wise to school my mother at this particular moment.

Willy was the first to speak up, “I talked Carol into selling it to Josh.” Then Josh and Willy told Mom and Almeda everything. Remarkably, things didn’t turn out that bad for us. Mom and Almeda decided to take the pellet gun, ground us for a month, and they marched us down to Carol’s trailer to tell her what we had done. I was shocked

because this was the era that boys got the belt for being bad, but we didn't get one spanking. I guess being honest isn't such a bad gig after all.

Direction for Isaiah, Jordan and Tazsanay

Michael Jackson

You are my children and above all things
I will do for you what I will do for no other, even if it takes
dying.

The years of hard work to provide for my family
involve blood, sweat, and tears with no guarantees.

We must go through life where there is one guarantee.
Whoever is born and has breath will one day be deceased.

Pray that there are no traps to eliminate me from
progressing.
Hopefully I will travel further than those who were on this
quest before me.

People change like the weather.
My love for you never changes—it's unconditional.

I will appreciate and protect you whether you're good or
bad, wrong or right—
this is my plight.

I've learned many things from those who were before me—
hope, determination and patience come in handy.

I give to you what I can if you ever become lost in your
travels.
This will help you through the trials and tribulations you
will be facing.

These words I express come from the heart.
The time will come when you will move on and we will be
apart.

Keep in mind the times you and I have spent together along with what you can do to become prosperous and content.

Respect, love and trust yourself to the best of your ability, Trust in God first, before man or anything.

Wrecked

Todd Bowlin

Wretched life.

Unfair death.

He was taken from the seemingly ironclad jaws of life,
into the murky indefinite waters of demise.

That cool June night in 1986, on his bike,
wrecked by an old pickup truck with Iowa plates,
driven by a man driven by inebriation.

Shiny new red Harley Davidson on Kansas Highway 32—
wrecked.

Pretty long-blond-haired woman on the backseat—
wrecked.

Two families, one without a mother, one without a father—
wrecked.

A future life-long drunk from Iowa
got away with his life, but wrecked away his sanity.
Replaying foggy glimpses of memory
that remain embossed on his conscience from that chilly
night,
they drive him toward his bottle of slow death.

Unfair life.

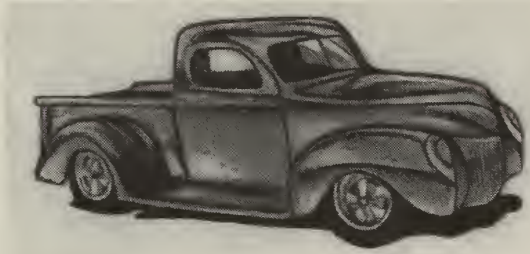
Wretched death.

Indian Creek Road

Dane Yirkovsky

I was on my way to an old train depot I located on a map at the local library. It had been abandoned for many years and I thought it might hold some old treasures, such as coins, jewelry, or any type of artifact. I started out early that Saturday morning wearing my favorite faded blue-jeans and Grateful Dead shirt, topping off my attire with my one and only lucky green fishing cap. The temperature was in the mid-seventies with a slight breeze out of the west and the sun already peeking over the hills.

Cruising down the highway, enjoying the peacefulness of being alone on the road, I had my elbow leaning out the window and my coffee cup sitting on the dash, its steam causing the windshield to fog up. Joni Mitchell was in the CD player singing about being stardust on the road to the garden.



Driving a 1940 Ford pickup with a Permasol blue metallic paint job, I felt alive as it danced with sparkles from the sunshine.

The polished chrome wheels captured the sun's rays and reflected them like a precious jewel. Black leather diamond tuck interior made the truck even more beautiful. It sported a high performance 327 out of a Corvette, coupled with a Chevy drive train.

Harry, my stepfather, who considers himself a perfectionist, had restored this truck and loaned it to me on this particular day. Harry bears a passion for golfing and restoring old trucks. Being a Chevy man like myself, you couldn't help but envy other late models such as the one I was in.

On the seat and floorboard next to me was my White's Spectrum XLT metal detector along with my back

pack carrying the tools needed to dig up any treasures I might discover. I'm hoping today to turn up a 1909-S VDB wheat penny or a 1937-D threelegged buffalo nickel. In fine to very fine condition, either of these would be of great value and a big prize to any collection.

Hunting for lost treasures is a real passion of mine and a break from drawing portraits or painting. I really love grabbing my equipment and heading out to wrestle with God's country. Getting so involved in prospecting, I would have a tendency to lose track of time and usually end up camping out or getting a motel room, not wanting to travel back at such a late hour. Knowing my track record, I was always prepared by keeping a tent, lantern, and other necessities in my possession.

I love the excitement of the Spectrum tones dinging when combing the six-inch coil across something metal. The needle on the view window indicates the type of metal discovered. Digging it up to see exactly what it is can be very exciting. It's not uncommon to dig up lots of old wheat pennies, jewelry, or even old toys.

Three miles out of Marion, Iowa, traveling north on Highway 13, I came up over a hill. I saw the pond approaching on my right side, a place I visited many times as a youth. Across the highway from the pond, a quarter-mile down the gravel road is where I lived when I was nine years old. Fields were tall with corn, but I was still able to see the rooftops of the three old barns and the house we once occupied.


Deciding I wanted to have a look around for old times' sake, I made a quick detour; I had all day to hunt. Taking a left off the highway, I turned onto Indian Creek Road. Slowly, I rolled down the road kicking up very little dust and gravel, not wanting to chip the paint job. As the cornfield inched by, I could see the stalks heavy with dew glistening in the sun. The old white farmhouse and faded red barns began to come into focus. Arriving, I turned in to the dirt driveway and parked.

Getting out of the truck, I leaned up against the

front fender and, crossing my legs, I started examining the ruins of an old forgotten past. Rolling down my shirt sleeve, I pulled out a pack of Marlboro menthol cigarettes, tapping the pack against my hand to draw one out. Reaching into my pants pocket, I pulled out my black Bic lighter and struck the flint wheel twice before it took. I cupped my hand around the flame to shelter it from the slight breeze. As I drew a long drag from the cigarette and blew out the smoke, I began to remember a place where questions ran deep.

The old two-story house still had some remnants of old paint chipped and curled, exposing the grains of the bleached natural wood. The eaves and spouts were rusting and barely hanging on. The roof over the porch was sagging and the deck severely warped. Many of the windows had been broken out; a couple of the black shutters were loosely hanging crooked. Bushes under the front living room window had grown wild and mother's flower beds had long ago been invaded by weeds.

While I was observing the surroundings, Pepper



came running from around the corner of the house. He jumped up on his back paws and placed his front ones on my chest. I flicked my cigarette off to the side and knelt down to pet him and scratch behind

his ears. We were both so excited to see each other, like old long lost friends. Pepper was a black and white Border collie with a touch of brown on his chest. He loves to be at your heels, either trying to trip you with his paws or nip at you to get your attention to play.

I decided I would get my Spectrum XLT out and have a look around the old farm before traveling on to my original destination. Prior to taking out the detector and equipment for the hunt, I wanted to look inside the old ruins of the house.

Crossing the brown lawn, I carefully stepped onto the low slanting porch, afraid that I might fall through; I

reached for the screen door that no longer had any paint or screen left in it. As I pulled on the flimsy door, it broke from its top hinge and twisted to the point of breaking. I was able to catch it before the whole door came loose. I then opened the old hand-carved oak door, surprised it was not locked. It made a loud screeching noise that echoed through the house.

Stepping across the threshold, entering into my past, I felt a sense of longing. I began feeling like I was being possessed and now being stalked by that entity. Later I realized that this entity was me, or someone I once was.

The house smelt very musty and moldy. My eyes began to focus on the contents inside. The yellow and green floral wallpaper was peeling. Cobwebs were hanging from the light cover and in the corners of the room. On the wall hung the wooden fork and spoon that were used on our backsides whenever we got out of line. Mom's little helping hand, as she used to warn us.

The wooden floorboards had a good covering of dust; you could see tracks from rodents that had no doubt come to occupy the place as their residence.

Looking to the right through the entryway, I could see the old black cast iron potbelly stove in the corner of the kitchen. I began to remember the night we had brought down a couple of mattresses from our beds. It was a cold night and we slept there on the floor. The only heat we had that night was from the old stove fueled by propane being pumped in from the tank out back of the house. We could afford to fill the tank only once a month, so in the winter we had to save what we could. I remember that night so vividly.

We were playing this game where we would lie in opposite directions with our feet at each other's head, write letters or words with our fingers on the bottoms of our feet and we'd have to guess what was written. The memory of this gave me a longing for those days. I guess it was the closeness of our family at a time when all we had was each other. Coming from a family of seven children, my mom and dad

did their best to provide, but poverty was present.

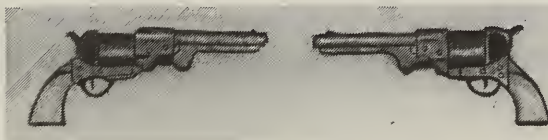
Dad was always busy, but in his free time would sit in his Lazy Boy recliner with his Old Milwaukee beer and Winston cigarettes watching re-runs of Laurel and Hardy. Most of the time mom was the one to help with our chores and spend time being adventurous with us kids. She was our Mrs. Robinson, buzzing on her caffeine fix of Pepsi.



Glancing to my left, I saw the stairs that led to our bedrooms. Walking over to them, I carefully applied weight, testing them on my way up, afraid they might give way. They screeched and cracked, echoing through the house.

Slowly, I reached the top; turning to my left was the bedroom I had shared with two of my brothers. Stepping inside, I saw an old portable record player on which I used to play the Beatles and Stones. Beside it was a Gibson acoustic guitar that belonged to my brother Kenny. It had seen its better days and suffered from overuse. I closed my eyes and the old guitar started to play an old country tune, reminding me of an old game we used to play. Kenny would strum a few chords while we would all try to guess what the tune was. Most of the time it was the same song, either from George Strait or Hank Williams Sr., he would play while trying to master his talent.

I noticed on the other side of the room my brother Darren's red cowboy hat hanging on the post of one of the bunk beds, its white trim



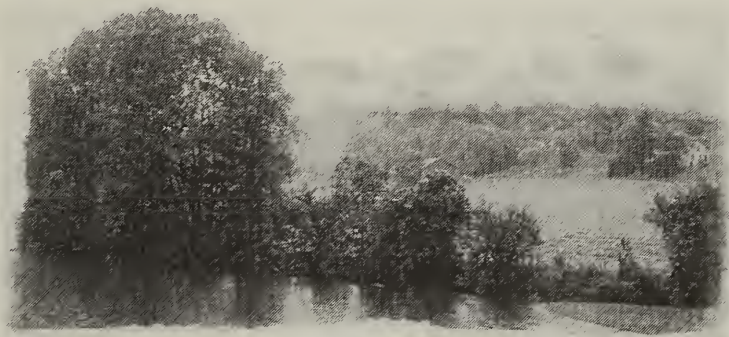
and string still hanging down with the little bead you would slide up to

fasten tightly to your head. Hanging with the hat there was a holster that once carried two pistols. Darren had them hanging there at night for security while he slept. The pistols were the only things my brother kept on him while playing Cowboy and Indians. He wouldn't have been caught dead without them and probably packed the pistols when we moved.

Looking out the broken window next to the bed, I could see dead insect carcasses in the sill. Staring across the rows of corn, I could see the rusty iron bridge stretching over Indian Creek where we used to play and run along the tree line. Mom was always telling us to go find a tree to climb when she wanted us out of her hair, so that was where we headed off to. From atop a big oak, I could see for miles.

I began to envision the day my mother walked into the house from shopping; she bought my brother Dave and me a Remington .22 rifle. We had been pestering her for over a year for this gun. A smile cracked my face and I ran up and gave her a hug like no other. The pestering had instantly started again until she took us out to shoot it. The following weekend, our mother took us down the tree line to do some shooting. That was the day I shot my very first gun and a rabbit. I felt like I had achieved adulthood.

* * *



I decided to go outside and have a look around and as I was leaving the bedroom I stopped and looked into the closet. I had carved “Dane-n-Jenny” inside of a heart hidden on the top shelf and wondered if it was still there. Jenny was a blonde haired, blue-eyed girl that lived down the road about a mile and we would sneak off to meet at the pond. One particular night we were both sitting on the wooden dock with our silhouette reflections from the moonlight mirroring off the ripples of water as I leaned over to kiss her. She was the first girl I had ever kissed. Being so in love with her (so I thought at the time), when

we moved I was sick and heartbroken for what seemed like eternity.

* * *



Leaving the bedroom, I stopped to look into my sister's old room. I noticed an old doll that belonged to my oldest sister Cori lying on the floor. It was missing an arm and one eye was open staring somewhere above and far away, its long eyelashes covered with dust. Noticing it had had its hair cut in different layers, I instantly remembered the day this occurred. That day, I walked in on Cori cutting her hair as well as the doll's. I took the scissors away from her and left them both with unfinished hair cuts. Leaving the doll untouched, not wanting to disturb it, I wondered if it was waiting for me to leave so she could close her other eye and continue to be at peace.

* * *

Reaching the bottom of the stairs and heading to the back door through the kitchen, I began to smell what seemed to be German chocolate cake. It was a birthday favorite of mine; one that mom and grandma would always bake together. They always baked two cakes because I shared a birthday with my brother Dave who was a year younger than I. I didn't care much for having to share a birthday; it kept me from getting more presents. I know my brother shared this same feeling because we had fought about it many times.

The best part about a birthday at our house is that it was celebrated with a big party. Grandma would show up in her big white Cadillac with something you always needed. I loved to go visit her place. She was never without some kind of sweets and always baking desserts, one of my favorites being her sugar cookies smothered with frosting

and colored sprinkles.

Grandma had a grey tabby cat named Tippy, but I named him Terrible Tippy, the cat about which every dog has nightmares. I didn't care much for Terrible Tippy and I guess he didn't care too much for me either because he was constantly scratching or biting me. Grandma also had some pet fish, my favorite being a red-tailed shark. The fish were seemingly attracted to me as I would find their food and severely over-feed them.

Sneaking off to my Uncle Gary's bedroom was a world of its own. He was always building something. He had war planes hanging from the ceiling, army tanks, trucks, and men set up like a battleground. He even had an electric train set up in the midst of the room, equipped with a community of buildings, houses, and people. The roadways were surrounded with forests and automobiles. I would imagine getting lost in the world he had created. Waiting for him to come home and bring it all to life for me was even more spectacular.

* * *

Crossing over the threshold onto the back porch, there was an Old Milwaukee beer can, one that no doubt belonged to my father who died in 1976. Noticing it was the old pull tab style and solid tin, I just kicked it out of my path and found my way out to the backyard. In the distance, I could hear birds singing and saw pigeons flying around the barns.

I noticed right away that Pepper was lying next to the swing set, still standing in its original position; one swing was attached by a rusty chain screeching as it swayed in the breeze. My sister Marcia used to sit in that swing for hours singing and talking to Pepper along with her imaginary friends. Mom had to bribe her with candy or some kind of treat to get Marcia to go out to play. She would never leave mom's side and still clings to her today.



I can see her there now, a sucker in her mouth, wearing her yellow sundress and long brown hair flowing behind her as she glided in the swing, carrying on her conversation paying me no attention.

Next to her swing was a big worn out tractor tire full of sand, a place where her twin brother Marvin would play. He enjoyed building a big city with roadways he could travel about with his Hot Wheels. He carried out glasses of water with him to make rivers and lakes and used the mud to help construct bridges while building his world.

Walking over and looking down into the sand tire, I noticed a shining object. Upon inspection, I realized it was one of Marvin's Hot Wheels.



He surely must have misplaced it because to this day he still has a huge collection of them and Matchboxes collected over the

years. I reached down digging it out of the sand and after dusting it off, I put it in my pocket. Seeing it was in good shape, I couldn't wait to surprise Marvin when I got home.

As I was bent over, Pepper began licking my face. Before I was able to get to my feet, he leaped up placing his front paws on my shoulder, knocking me off balance. As I fell backwards, he was able to get the advantage he needed to continue to soak my face with drool and his tongue was finding its way to my ear.

Gaining my position and getting to my feet, I



noticed a BMX bicycle leaning beside the water meter attached to the house. Most of its original black paint had disappeared. The handle grips and pads were still there, but the tires were flat and weather rotted. Rust

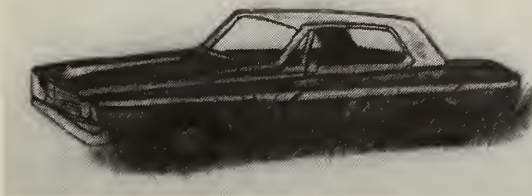
had visibly taken over the rims and chain. The bike had

belonged to my brother David and at one time it was the fastest around. He has many trophies to support this claim.

I proceeded to the barns to have a look around. Pepper and I headed off like best of friends. On the way, I stopped to have a look at the old black 1963 Fury Plymouth two-door hard top. It was sitting on blocks buried in a mess of weeds. Seeing that rust had won this battle, I stuck my finger through a hole in the door just below the side mirror. Wiping the dust off the driver's side window, I noticed how the interior had deteriorated and mice had taken over. There were cans and bottles lying on the floorboard. Opening the door with some effort, the hinges came to life squeaking and grinding.

Reaching down to pick up a piece of yellow faded paper, I realized it was a gas receipt from 1972. Unfolding it in amazement, I saw the price for gas was 53 cents a gallon at the Deep Rock filling station where my father worked. Looking through the glove box and finding a slinky, green stamps, cigarette coupons and a map, I closed the door to let the mice resume their residence.

This took me back to the day my father let me drive for the very first time. I was in the driver's seat controlling the wheel, while he was right beside me managing the gas and brake pedals. I could



smell the stale smoke of Winston cigarettes and the Old Milwaukee beer coming from his breath as he coached me along. I remember thinking I was the luckiest kid in the world as we cruised down Indian Creek Road, wishing my friends could have seen me man-handling the old Mopar. At one point, my father started to accelerate at my request; I had never concentrated any harder than I did that day, feeling as if I was going 100 mph, in actuality probably peaking at 30 to 40 mph. Every once in a while he would grab hold of the steering wheel to keep us from going into the ditch as we approached a corner. This was truly one of

the greatest moments in my life.

* * *

Heading back towards the barn with Pepper running ahead, leading me somewhere in particular, I followed him obediently. He was leading me to the barn where all of us kids played hideout in the hayloft. I could see where the door of the barn had fallen off and was now resting up against the side of it. The red paint had faded to an orange and flaked miserably.

As we approached the barn and stepped inside, there was just enough light beaming through the doorway to make it visible. The gaps in the side of the walls had light streaming through them, giving the appearance of Jacobs's ladder. It smelt of stale, moldy hay and pigeon droppings, very much like it did back in our playing days. Hanging from the rafters was the block and tackle with an old frayed rope that once held us kids as we jumped off the loft and swung until we decided to let go and land in the hay below. Instantly, I could hear the echoes of laughter and joy that engulfed our playtime. It rang so clear, as the barn was now playing a recording of time past.

I climbed up the ladder to the hayloft to see if the fort that my brother Kenny and I made was still intact. We had hidden it so that it was undetectable by merely looking in its direction. You had to climb over the bales and crawl back to the corner and lower yourself down into a big open cavity to reach it. I was a little skeptical to do this, afraid that maybe some creature had decided to move in, not wanting to startle it. I made sure to make as much noise as possible while making my way to the fort. After carefully maneuvering, I made it to where the fort was supposed to be. Locating the opening, I found it was still there. Looking into the darkness of the fort, I decided not to crawl inside because the only light I had was my Bic and I figured that wouldn't be a good idea.

Climbing back down from the loft, I noticed some old traps hanging on the wall. I walked over and started to mess with them and figured they would never be usable

again without some much needed TLC. I remember using them a lot to catch opossum and raccoon or whatever else wandered into them. I never trapped to eat; I just enjoyed catching things, but I never let my parents know what I was up to.

I once trapped a young opossum and, feeling sorry for it, I saved its life and decided to keep it for a pet, unbeknownst to my parents. We had an old silo in which the mortar and bricks started falling away, so my family used it to store old pieces of lumber and metal. I figured this was a good place to keep my new pet opossum. I would have to wear these big old gloves to handle him and to protect my skin from his random biting.

My relatives came to visit one weekend and when I showed it to my cousin she ran inside and told my parents. My uncle came outside to see the opossum and it started hissing. I wasn't scared because I was used to his behavior. As I started to put on my gloves and pick him up, my uncle told us to go back in the house. After our relatives left, I went to see my pet and it was nowhere to be found. Later, I learned that my uncle had taken a 2x4 and killed it.

* * *

Walking out of the barn, I noticed it starting to get cloudy. Looking at my watch, I realized I had been walking around the homestead for two hours. In order to resume my original journey, I figured I should probably get going. I took out another cigarette and lit it up before making it back to the truck. Something scared up a couple of pheasants in the cornfield next to me. At first, I thought it may have been me, but when I began looking for Pepper, he was nowhere to be found. I started calling for him, looking in all directions and he still hadn't come. Stopping for a short time, taking a drag from my smoke, I gave a couple more calls for Pepper. I wondered where he had run off to. By the time I reached the truck Pepper still hadn't surfaced. I was feeling like my escort had been a ghost and I was his honored guest. Without being able to say goodbye to my host, I climbed into the truck just as the sky broke

into a thunderous rain.

* * *

Driving away looking back in the rearview mirror, I began thinking that I was walking around with another person inside of me and was left with only tears of a child who has grown and lost his dreams in the blink of an eye. I would never be able to discover any treasure with greater value than the one I uprooted those last two hours.



“Scrapbook Letters from Daddy...”

My little princess,

It wasn't until after I entered this prison system that I became aware that I was your father. The lifestyle and behavior I took part in left nothing for certain. During my first year away from home, incarcerated within these walls, I was blessed with the news of my paternal bond with you. The miracles that God allows to transpire through even the roughest of times are to be thankful for, and I am most thankful.

Abby Lyn, you are my youngest daughter and I smile every time I think about you. Such a tiny little baby girl with a heart of gold, you seem to be so forgiving and understanding. I suppose that's natural for you, as you know love from all directions in your life. Your grandparents have kept you safe, and in the home you should have, while mommy and I regain control of the insanity we inflicted on ourselves through our addiction.

I'll spend years in the confines of this place, trying to make the necessary improvements that will grant me a place in your life. It was because I surrendered to the power of my addiction that I fell so far away from you. Before you are able to fully understand all of this, I will return to your life, and provide many precious moments for both of us.

Expressing love to you has been possible through frequent visits here at the prison, as Grandma has made this possible. Your mommy has reinforced the fact that “Daddy Joe” is coming home someday, and this makes you smile. Funny as it may seem, you began calling me Daddy Joe as soon as you knew my first name, and it kind of stuck.

Let me assure you that I love you so very much, and you have my heart, young lady. The life that we will know together is approaching soon, and to be honest, I can't wait. This experience away from you has certainly made me aware of my mistakes, and given me direction towards a better future, so long as you are in it.

I love you little lady. See you soon. “Daddy”

“Scrapbook Letters from Daddy”

My little man,

As my third child, and my only son, you have given my world the well-rounded effect that was needed. Your great-grandfather, grandfather, and I have carried the name given to you, which is a tradition you may continue, when you have a son.

Joey IV, I pray that you re-install integrity to the name I defamed, by breaking the law and coming to prison. My mistakes are many, and I'm focused on living them down. My release date is in sight and with the lessons I've learned through this time away from you, I plan on living a bright future that includes both of us.

Your grandparents have rescued you from foster care, after your mother and I so carelessly lost you. Thank God for the miracle of family love which has kept you home, where you belong. Your mother's parents have been your guardian angels.

Your smiling face brings warmth to my heart every time I'm allowed to see you during a visit here at the prison. It installs faith in our future and the value of these times couldn't be measured. I see myself in your existence, and this I cherish.

I love you, little man, and I can't wait to have the opportunity to share our lives together. The Good Lord has reasons for what takes place during the journey of life, and we must remain faithful to this. We all are such a small part of the big picture.

My future is you! See you soon. “Love, Daddy”

“Scrapbook Letters from Daddy...”

My most precious baby girl,

There are so many things I want to tell you, about how lucky I feel to be your daddy, and almost every time I try, I lose my way. Oh, it's not because there isn't much to say, more so just the opposite.

What you've done by entering this world has made me the man I've always wanted to be. You might ask yourself “What does this mean,” and in time you will know as you grow older and realize the relationship you and I share.

Since your arrival to your mother and me, the pendulum of life has swung in such a way that I'm not familiar with. One thing for sure, it's in the right direction, and the quality parents that you need will be most apparent in your life.

I want you to know this Taylor Made: you have given me reason to belong to the very life I live, and I know as time goes on this will present itself. If there were something I could say to let you know my deepest feelings, and only use one word, it would be “thanks” for being my daughter!

You have entered my life at a time that was put aside “just for you” by God Himself, as He knows when this would be correct. During my younger years, I don't think that I could've possibly been the father to you that I plan to be now, so I'm thankful.

Your mother is a beautiful person, and your creation makes us the most fortunate parents ever, as we have been truly blessed.

I'll be home soon. You are my world!

I Love You Taylor. “Daddy”

Letter to Inmates, Yankton Federal Prison Camp, Memorial Day, May 26, 2008

Good morning.

It's cloudy, raining lightly, and I'm thinking about the soldiers I've known, and being grateful to them for being willing to die for the kind of freedom this country has always offered. I just read your letters for the second time, and thought about the time we spent together. I'm impressed at how many of you wrote, and how literate and well-organized your letters are: this ability to express yourself in a letter, clearly and concisely, will be a definite asset when you are back out here competing for jobs.

I'm also happy to know that you appreciated my visiting class, and the things I had to say. I find it strange to think that anything I say might help anyone, when I think about how I've fumbled along living my life.

You could probably tell I was nervous, in spite of Dr. Reese's encouragement, and you all helped me relax by the way you received me. I've worked in several different types of prisons, for different lengths of time, and have several times been involved in situations that were difficult for everyone involved, so I was a little twitchy at first. Seeing how polite and attentive you guys were was very reassuring. Thank you for making me feel comfortable.

And you're right: I thought long and hard about what might be practical advice for you, both as writers and as men incarcerated. I didn't want to just trot in from the outside world and blather on. I haven't been in jail except as a visitor, but I think the experience is like giving birth or having your best friend die: unless it's happened to you, you don't know what it's like.

Or, as Woody Guthrie put it, "You can't write a song about

a whorehouse unless you been in one.”

I did ask Dr. Reese about you, and spent time trying to figure out what would be most useful to you, so I’m glad you understood that. I didn’t want to say the same things to you as I said to a bunch of college kids who have barely started to live.

Not all of you will become writers in the sense of being published; not all of you want to be. But I hope all of you will keep writing as a way of helping yourself to understand what’s happening in your life, and a way of remembering the things that are important in order to improve it as you continue to live it. Don’t just use writing to remember mistakes so you can avoid them, but recall the times when things went better than you thought, people who were good to you, things you have seen that encouraged you. You wouldn’t believe you could forget some of the most dramatic things that happen, but you will. It’s easy to remember the bad: I can remember almost every detail of the night my husband died. But I have to work at remembering his kindness, his courage, what he did and said when he was defeated. And even if you don’t understand something now, you may understand it later if you’ve written it down. I’ve done a lot more writing that is for myself alone than I’ve done for publication. I enjoy writing, enjoy trying to convey an idea to someone to whom it’s new or strange— but a lot of my writing is trying to figure out what I think about something that has happened to me, or to figure out how to keep living after, for example, my husband died. That’s the important part: figuring out how to keep on living, enjoying life, being kind to other people, not blowing up in futile anger.

Writing helps me figure out what to do about injustice: sometimes you can’t do anything. But sometimes, writing about the problem helps me understand what I can do to fix it, even if it’s just voting, or writing a letter to the editor to

say what I believe.

My best wishes to all of you, and I hope writing will help you pass the time until you are free, as well as helping you improve your lives.

Linda M. Hasselstrom

Salvation in a Bottle: Doom Malt Liquor

Justin Bollig

With a click and barely audible hiss, the lighter in Jacob Isakson's hand jumped to life, shooting out a small, intensely hot flame. The small blue flame easily lit the large Cuban cigar perched between his lips as he slowly worked it back and forth across the tip.

As Jacob puffed away, savoring every sweet inhalation from the cigar, thick white aromatic clouds billowed out surrounding his head. He couldn't help but think back to what the sales person at the smoke shop had told him.

"Mr. Isakson, believe me when I say, you will love these; not only are they rolled from only the choicest leaves in all of Cuba, but it is claimed that they are rolled up on the thighs of beautiful young Cuban women," the young clerk said with a devilish wink and a snicker.

Jacob had laughed along with the eager sales person and had bought the cigars because they were expensive, not because he believed his sales pitch. But now as he settled back into his plush, leather sofa and was indulgently puffing away on one, he swore he could taste the sweet flesh of the young woman each time he put it to his lips.

Setting the tasty Cuban down in the crystal ashtray on the marble-topped coffee table, Jacob picked up a copy of the newspaper to see what lay inside. After only briefly reading the financial news, Jacob folded it carefully and with a contented grin placed the paper back on the table next to the ashtray and resumed smoking his cigar.

"Another Hostile Takeover By M.O.D. Inc.," one headline had read, while another pondered, "Where will M.O.D. Inc. Business Blitzkrieg End?" Yet another headline screamed, "Financial Analysts Worried about Financial Fallout Locally!" The articles all told stories so familiar to Jacob that not only could he have quoted the lines from each without reading them, he most definitely

could recognize the names of the whiny reporters who had written each if he was told a few lines from them first.

Jacob took pride in the fact that he did his job exceptionally well. He didn't necessarily love his job at M.O.D. Inc. as head liquidator of the companies and corporations they acquired. What he loved was the power and comforts that came with the job, regardless of the fact that people said they were financial predators who singled out smaller businesses. He loved buying them and then breaking them apart, making as much profit as possible with little or no concern for the people hurt in the process. Jacob believed these claims to be greatly exaggerated and probably spread by their competitors to sully their public image.

"All simply the cost of doing the business in this modern age," he had told himself on many an occasion. And even if there was any truthfulness to the claims, Jacob really didn't give a damn. He sat on his plush Italian leather sofa in the middle of his sprawling five thousand dollar a month apartment, puffing away on a cigar that tasted so good it had to be a sin, and knew that it was all worth it at any cost.

At the moment that Jacob was at his most smug and self-content, a faint chill crept into his body. A small shiver ran up and down his spine and patches of goose-flesh broke out all over his arms. The coldness that was barely noticeable seconds before seemed to be taking root in his very bones. Since it was mid-August and his apartment was climate controlled, Jacob found the sudden chill disconcerting and hoped he wasn't getting sick.

With a brief shudder, Jacob put down his cigar and got up from the couch, walking over to the bar to pour himself a brandy. He dearly hoped that a simple drink would chase away the chill that was now spreading rapidly within him with each passing moment. The rich amber liquid flowed from the cut crystal decanter with quiet sounds as Jacob poured himself three fingers' worth. Now feeling more than just a little cold and shaking noticeably,

Jacob set down the decanter and picked up his snifter full of brandy before walking back to the couch and sitting down.

Throwing his head back and taking two massive swallows, Jacob downed the brandy he had only moments before poured, then sat there coughing and choking on the vapors. Jacob waited desperately for the liquid's warm rush to surge up through his body's core to relieve him from the cold that now wracked him so unmercifully. For one blissful moment the warmth that he had craved washed over him, blotting out the cold.

But with a rapidness that was so overwhelming it scared Jacob to death, the cold came rushing back stronger than before. He got up, barely able to move because his muscles were cramping from the cold, shooting bolts of pain all through his body with each step.

Finally, making his way to the thermostat, Jacob's heart dropped. He felt as if the thermostat was mocking him, with its comfortable reading of sixty-eight degrees, while he stood there feeling like a side of beef in a meat locker. The cold and fear so completely blotted out Jacob's senses that he couldn't think of what to do next. Call for help was the only idea that popped into his head. Jacob wasn't able to do much more than knock the phone from its cradle and ineffectively poke his cramping and shaking fingers at the buttons once he reached it. Releasing a wail so full of desperation and pain that it could have curdled the blood, Jacob fell quaking to the floor.

The wail was still passing over his lips as Jacob awoke with a start from the recurring dream that had once again quickly become a nightmare. Being awake was not an escape for poor Jacob at all. Along with still being mind-shatteringly cold and wracked with pain, he was once again anchored to the true hell that was his life.

Rising slightly to his knees in the confines of the packing crate he now called home, Jacob began sifting through the fast food wrappers, empty cans, and other filth that littered the floor around him. As in his dream, he still desperately craved succor from the cold. But now that

desire was viciously coupled with a need to escape from the awfulness of his surroundings. These days that relief was best found in the all-numbing completeness of a bottle.

To his dismay all he could find were bottles that were as empty as he felt inside. With a harsh utterance that was barely understandable due to the loud chattering of his teeth, Jacob gave up his fruitless search. In his mind he cried, “God, help me please, make this suffering stop!” He then proceeded to scramble out of the rear flap of his crate.

Once out of his hobo condominium, Jacob became suddenly aware of a fifty-five gallon drum that someone had started a fire in. The dancing flames from inside the barrel beckoned to Jacob like a siren’s song promising him relief from the bitter cold if he would only come a little closer. Shuffling over as fast as his cramping limbs would take him, Jacob began luxuriating in the waves of heat radiating off the barrel’s open top.

Once the worst of his shakes from the cold had resided and he could focus on his surroundings, Jacob noticed a man standing close by also enjoying the barrel’s heat. He didn’t remember the man being there a moment ago when he first saw the barrel, but, then again, as cold and miserable as he had been, Jacob could understand how he had missed the stranger.

The man was attired similarly as Jacob was, mismatched thrift store clothing and other apparel all torn and caked in grime. Yet, unless Jacob’s eyes were deceiving him, the man’s skin, hair, and nails were immaculately clean and even seemed to be shining faintly in the fire’s glow. Maybe it was the damned hallucinations from the lack of alcohol starting up again. He really wasn’t sure; all he knew was that he needed to get himself a drink, and fast.

“Evening friend, cold enough for you?” asked the stranger. There was a glimmer in his eyes that made them twinkle ever so slightly. He then smiled boldly with a mouth full of perfectly straight and amazingly white teeth.

The smile looked to Jacob like a freakish combination of a game show host and great white shark.

The twinkling glimmer in the man's eyes was the same kind Jacob often saw in the eyes of the wackos who came around claiming they could talk to God. Given the strangeness of the man before him and his present lack of booze, Jacob was sure that he was most probably imagining him. But just in case he wasn't, he blurted out a mumbled reply while unconsciously cringing from him.

"Tell you what makes me forget about the cold on a night like this," replied the man, ignoring Jacob's obvious discomfort and weak response to his greeting. "A nice bottle, yes indeedy, that's the ticket on a night like this," said the man, instantly grabbing Jacob's full attention. The man then reached down on the ground next to him and plucked a bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag that Jacob was positive wasn't there before. The stranger took a long pull off the bottle and, smiling that disquieting smile of his, offered it to Jacob.

"God please," Jacob prayed as he reached out to grasp the bottle. He hoped his hand would actually grasp it and not pass through, proving all this to be nothing more than an elaborate hallucination. Jacob almost cried when his fingers clasped the bottle, and he greedily put it to his lips, taking several huge swallows. Immediately Jacob felt the warmth of the booze flow through his insides followed by a strange sense of calmness. It seemed to be washing over him, growing stronger like the cold had done in his recent dream.

When Jacob finally came around from his rapture, he noticed the man seemed to have disappeared. For a moment, he once again thought maybe the man had been a hallucination, but the bottle in his hands and the wonderful sensations coursing through his body said otherwise. "Oh well, more for me," Jacob said, surprised that his teeth were no longer chattering and he could now speak clearly. Basking in his good fortune of being both warm and having the potential of getting mind-numbingly drunk, Jacob took another pull from the bottle. He was once again rewarded with another swell of heat and a sense of well-being.

With a sense of blissfulness so foreign to him these days spreading all through his mind, Jacob allowed his thoughts to drift back to how he had come to be in this place living the way he was. It had all started one day when he was sitting there on his couch, smoking that wonderful cigar: happy and completely smug. At the moment, when the cold usually started to creep into his body in his nightmare, the phone had in reality rung.

“Jacob, oh Christ man, turn on your T.V. to CNN,” blurted out his co-worker, Bret, before he even had a chance to say hello. “You won’t believe what’s happening, it’s horrible. What will we do?” Bret frantically spewed into the phone, not giving Jacob a chance to respond. Bret quickly said, “Damn, Jacob, I got to call some other people,” and hung up the phone, never giving Jacob a chance to utter a single word.

After hanging up the phone again, Jacob grabbed the remote off the table and turned his huge flat screen on, flipping the channel to CNN. As the anchor person relayed the breaking news to the viewing public with her trademark chipperness a single word escaped Jacob’s lips: “Shit!”

Apparently the I.R.S and the F.B.I had been investigating certain persons in and associated with Martin, Oberholtz, and Dietrich Inc. for creative bookkeeping and other nefarious activities. None of which Jacob had any clue about, but he was sure would affect him anyway. It was at that point when Jacob had gotten up and poured himself the first of what would become many strong drinks.

Once the smoke had cleared and the perpetrators had all been hauled off to prison, M.O.D Inc. was still around, albeit in a highly weakened and vulnerable state. It didn’t take long for the proverbial sharks to start circling once the blood was in the water and the feeding frenzy commenced with abandon. The company that had once purchased and so uncaringly torn apart others was itself purchased, torn to pieces, and sold off.

And to Jacob, the greatest irony of all was when the once proud head liquidator was himself liquidated.

No new companies wanted anybody remotely associated with M.O.D, regardless if they had anything to do with the scandal, so Jacob was out of work. He turned to the booze to cope with it all, putting the final nail in the coffin of having any career at all.

Snapping back from that distant past, Jacob took another long drink off the bottle, hoping it would begin to blot out his thoughts and suddenly unhappy feelings the same way it had erased the cold. In fact, after he finished taking his drink, Jacob noticed that he was sweating and seemed to be getting hotter by the minute. "What the hell is in this stuff?" Jacob asked himself.

Pulling down the brown paper bag that was wrapped around the bottle, Jacob revealed the bright red label that read in shiny silver lettering, "Doom malt liquor." Jacob looked on in disbelief as he started to read the small print on the back of the label.

"Made with the waters from the River Styx, tears from the souls in the sixth ring of hell, and the concentrated pain and sorrow of those you hurt in your life." Jacob thought it had to be one of those new gimmicky drinks they were always coming out with these days: Black Death Vodka, Tarantula Tequila and the hundred other weird names he had heard. Or, at least that was what he hoped as he tilted the bottle back, taking another drink.

Polishing the bottle off finally, Jacob threw it into the barrel with disgust. Aside from making him feel so hot that he was starting to become uncomfortable, the booze hadn't made him the slightest bit drunk. In fact, he seemed to be thinking more clearly and feeling more vividly than he had in years which really terrified him, since all he could think about was his painful past. Tearing off several layers of clothing in an effort to cool down and having little success, Jacob looked up to see the stranger standing back in front of him smiling. With the heat still building stronger and stronger inside of him, Jacob cried at the man, "What have you done to me, what the hell is happening?"

Still smiling that perfect little smile of his, the man

replied, "Why, God has given you what you wanted. You begged him to make your entire suffering stop and this is the way that it is going happen," calmly stated the stranger. Jacob swore he heard a slight ring of enjoyment in the voice. "You will be purified by fire and I will take your soul to heaven," yelled the man, tilting back his head, laughing crazily.

As the heat once again reasserted itself upon his conscience, Jacob opened his mouth to scream but no sound came out. Instead a bright plume of flame and smoke shot from his mouth, terrifying Jacob out of his mind. The pain was unbearable and more intense than anything he had ever felt in his worst nightmares or waking hours and that was the way he supposed it was meant to be. Jacob's flesh began to burn and flake off his body, dropping him to his knees. Right before his eyes popped and melted down his face, Jacob saw the last and most beautiful thing he would ever see in his life.

As Jacob watched, the clothing of the stranger who had promised salvation through pain ripped apart and a large pair of wings burst from his back. "Come now, it is our time to go," said the angel as he stepped forward, slamming his hand into Jacob's chest, pulling out his still burning soul. With his task now completed, the angel gave several powerful flaps of his wings, propelling himself skyward towards heaven.

5 Nights in Vegas

Night golfing, Brothels, Gambling, Romance

Lee Dagostini

I took a moment to gather my senses. I just got off the plane and was standing in the Las Vegas airport terminal; I could hardly believe I was really here. I had heard all manners of stories of excitement, pleasure, adventure, and fun—a place where anything is possible: A hedonistic paradise. It was now time to find out if the stories were true.

Day 1 While playing blackjack at the Las Vegas Hilton I stumbled onto a little known secret. I was sitting on my behind playing blackjack for six hours and was getting restless to do something that required movement. For some reason I said out loud, “I sure wish I could play a round of golf right now.” An elderly, bald, heavy-set player whose breasts were so big that he would need a C-cup bra to hold them in place, quickly said, “Why don’t you do it then. There is a course ten minutes away from here.” I looked at him like he was insane, for it was midnight and pitch black outside. From the expression on my face, he figured I thought he was full of it or drunk. So, he quickly continued, “It is a nine hole, lighted course with a driving range; it is the only one in town.”

I had never heard of night golfing. It did not seem possible. I still did not believe him. I proceeded to stare into space with a puzzled look on my face. I was trying to ascertain if it was possible. Then, suddenly, the dealer (Mark) snapped me out of my trance by stating in a firm voice that the man was correct. That was all I needed to hear. I immediately thanked Mark and the old man and abruptly bolted from the table to get my golf clubs. I hailed a cab and was there in fifteen minutes. The place was a sight to behold. There were a couple dozen stadium lights lining the par thirty-six nine-hole course. A large section of

North Vegas was lit up like a stadium.

For the most part, it was the same as playing in the daytime, with a few exceptions. I thought it would be hard to see the flight of the ball. I figured I would lose several balls. That was not the case. Strangely, it was easier to follow the flight of the ball because the lighting was constant and evenly disseminated. However, depth perception was poor. I could not gauge the distance or trajectory to my intended target with much accuracy. Often, I would hit a good shot only to find that when I got to the ball it was too far or short. I found this annoying. The most noticeable difference was looking up into the sky to see the moon and stars instead of the sun and clouds. I never got used to that. It did not seem right!

Day 2 I had just got through taking a brutal beating at the gaming tables and was feeling especially down and dejected. I needed a quick fix, some pleasure, something to cheer me up. After contemplating my options, I figured I had five choices: Get a massage with a happy ending, pick up the phone and custom order an escort, go to a singles bar (meat market), pick up a hooker in the lounge, or go to a legalized brothel on the edge of town. I took the easy, legal, and unique route—I went to the brothel.

When I arrived I was a bit nervous; I did not know what to expect. So, I was pleasantly surprised to see that the outside of the building looked dumpy and unattended. As I walked through the door, the first thing I saw was about ten women gathered around in what appeared to be a lounge area. This relaxed me even more. Then I was greeted by an old, overweight, gruesome looking woman who escorted me to a small, isolated office in the back of the building (she was so creepy that if I had not just seen the ten women in the lounge, I would have bolted out the door and run for my life).

We talked business for ten minutes. There was an amazing amount of paperwork to read and fill out. I was surprised they did not hand me a 1099. There was one

disturbing waiver. It exempted them from any liability if I later claimed to have contracted any disease from my visit. After the business was completed, we got to the good part: picking a girl and the amount of time I would have to be with her.

The price range for the women was based on age. Not surprisingly, the younger women cost the most and the older women cost the least. I chose a thirty-year-old woman. I had never been with a woman who was older than I so I was excited about the prospect. I had three to choose from. I was handed a book that had several different pictures of the three women: One Asian, one Swedish, and one Latin. Some of the pictures were quite revealing. I definitely knew what I was going to get! I chose the woman of Asian descent; her name was Candy.

Finally, it was time to pick the amount of time I wanted to spend with Candy. I chose thirty minutes. It seemed like a comfortable amount of time. The business was done.

I was escorted to a room. I opened the door to find a smiling, bright-eyed Candy sitting on a couch. The lighting was dim, and there were no windows. The room was clean. Off to the left I spotted a dumpy bathroom with a shower. The furnishings and decor were similar to that of a seedy motel or a low end motel chain.

As she was introducing herself, she quickly got up and walked toward me. We extended pleasantries for a few minutes and then it was time to begin. She was almost through taking off her clothes (exposing a nice, shapely body that was far more inviting than the pictures suggested), when she stated that she makes virtually all her money on tips. She looked directly into my eyes and, in a soft, sexy voice, said that she would go beyond the normal activities and pleasantries if I would be willing to tip her. I was no idiot. I was so worked up with anticipation that I screamed "Yes" instantly.

Thirty-five minutes later I emerged from the room with a huge smile on my face. I felt good again, even

though it just dawned on me that I had parted with more money (two hundred dollars plus a two-hundred-dollar tip) to alleviate my depression than I lost to get depressed in the first place. I had no regrets. I was feeling great. I accomplished what I had set out to do: I no longer cared that I was thoroughly thrashed at the gaming tables for hours on end just before I arrived. My adrenaline was flowing. I was ready for more excitement.

Day 3 I was hanging around the gaming area in the MGM Grand Hotel Casino when I felt the urge to try my luck at blackjack. I reached into my pocket to discover that I had around three hundred dollars. I quickly found an open seat at a three-dollar minimum table (the lowest in the casino). The table was occupied by six players. At first glance, I quickly and rudely cataloged each player. It was a varied group: one old, one young, one wholesome, one strange, one beautiful, and one obnoxious. I sat in the middle spot directly facing the dealer. None of us players could have predicted the wild, unexpected, and exciting turn of events that would soon transpire.

After playing for an uneventful twenty minutes, a new dealer, Jane, was assigned to our table. Jane was a lively, middle-aged woman with a bubbly personality. She stood five feet seven inches tall; had short, curly hair, big, beautiful, white teeth and a pretty smile. Jane appeared happy to be joining us.

Meanwhile, I found myself being entertained by Joe, Marcy and Elisabeth. Joe had a distinct southern accent and an overbearing, obnoxious personality (he could not keep his mouth shut). I can safely say Joe had issues that a lifetime of regular therapy could not correct. He wore a huge cowboy hat, smoked a cheap cigar, and was slamming down drinks as fast as they arrived. Marcy was an anorexic, frail, grey-haired elderly lady who had virtually no muscle tone; she looked like a skeleton with skin. She would regularly make strange faces and gestures, like popping her eyes out of their sockets when she was anxious or smacking

her lips which made an annoying, repetitive, slurping sound. At all times she had a lit cigarette in her hand which hovered over an ashtray. Strangely, the cigarettes rarely reached her lips. She was my favorite. Elizabeth was a pleasant, middle-class, middle-aged housewife who was just happy to be in Vegas. She was polite, friendly, and a little reserved. Her presence added a bit of normalcy for me.

Jane was also a friendly dealer. For the first fifteen minutes at the table she gave out more chips (money) than she was taking in. This enabled us to gather some chips and start to feel positive about winning. Most of us were starting to slightly increase our bets. The group was coming to life.

Soon afterward, to our surprise and delight, Jane completely fell apart. For the most part, she either busted or ended up with a weak hand (seventeen or eighteen). This trend continued for quite some time. As we accumulated an abundance of chips, we significantly increased the size of our bets from the three- to five-dollar bets that we generally were betting when we started playing, to consistently betting twenty-five to one hundred dollars a hand. Eventually, we had what seemed to be an endless supply of chips in front of us. We felt invincible. I was having a blast.

The casino was taking a beating, the bosses were pissed off, and a crowd had gathered behind us. Glancing around the table, I roughly calculated that there were eight thousand dollars in chips for the good guys (us). I had about fifteen hundred. The pit boss (in charge of all the games in his area) and the floor man (assigned to watch about eight games in the pit boss's section) were hovering over Jane's shoulder staring intently at the table and her. Jane was clearly not enjoying this. Her smile disappeared, she suddenly became mute, and her hands were shaking. She was acting as if someone were holding a gun to her head. Adding to the allure of the situation, a group of spectators, fifteen or so, were crowding the table straining their necks to get a better look at what was happening.

In the distance, we saw a lone dealer walking our way. This was extremely unusual. Usually, several dealers appear at once at assigned intervals to relieve fellow dealers. It soon occurred to us that the casino was bringing in their ace in the hole—a house dealer. (To be classified as a house dealer one must consistently and mercilessly relieve the customers of their money.) We knew Jane was going to get pulled. However, realizing that if Jane started to deal another hand she would have to finish it, we quickly but neatly stacked a pile of chips into our betting circle in the hopes that Jane would start to deal. It worked. Jane turned over a card before Mr. Death arrived. The last hand was in progress. Joe bet around eight hundred dollars, Marcy five, Elizabeth two, and me six.

What a monster of a hand it was. Everyone's eyes were glued to Jane's left hand as she turned the cards face up. Elizabeth's hand was completed first; she had a twenty (two face cards). A great hand; she was in heaven. I was next. I was forced to stare in total disgust at the sixteen Jane had just dealt me; sixteen is the worst hand I could possibly have gotten. I started to feel nauseous and ill. Marcy had a garbage hand also: She had thirteen. She showed her displeasure by sucking in her face through her cheek bones and gums which caused her lips to pucker up, while attempting to pop her eyes out of their sockets; she looked like a fish. Joe was cursed or blessed, depending on how the cards would eventually fall with a total of ten (he was virtually forced to double down). Soon he would have sixteen hundred dollars in neutral territory. For the first time since I met him, he was speechless. Now for the moment of truth—Jane slowly turned over her card: seven of hearts. Not bad, but not good either. Statistically, Jane should have a ten card under the seven to total seventeen. This would not be considered a good hand, but it would beat mine.

It was time to play our hands. Elizabeth signaled to Jane that she did not need a hit. I had a big decision to make. Logic dictated that I should have taken a hit with

sixteen versus a seven (one should always take a hit in this situation). However, I did not have a big enough set of balls to ask for a card (at the moment, they felt like they had shrunk to the size of a grain of sand). I could not stomach the sight of a bust card being turned over and Jane scooping my money away. I was a coward. I signaled to stay pat. Marcy, with her pathetic thirteen, signaled for a card—she had bigger gonads than I (even though biologically she was barred from having a set). Jane turned over a six of diamonds (nineteen). Marcy's fish face instantly transformed into a happy, glowing crazy old lady face. Joe eagerly pushed the chips necessary to match his original bet into the betting circle which signaled to the dealer that he wanted to double down (take one card). Jane was not kind—it was a four of clubs. Joe slammed his hat to the ground and yelled at the top of his lungs, “God damn it.” All seemed bleak for Joe and me, but the hand was not over yet.

It was time for Jane to reveal her hole card. Tension filled the air. There was a moment of silence. Jane turned over a nine of clubs (sixteen): Garbage. Thank God! Loud and obvious displays of relief resonated all around, except for, of course, the casino staff. Mr. Death, the pit boss, and the floor man were livid. What a pathetic scene that was. One would have thought that it was their personal money at stake.

The next card would either bring us extreme jubilation or an overflow of despair and despondency. I could not bring myself to watch. I turned my body to the left and stared in the direction of the ceiling. I was physically ill. My insides were turning, my pulse was racing, and I felt nauseous and weak. I thought to myself, “What is going on? I am winning. Why do I feel like I am having a nervous breakdown?” Suddenly, the crowd erupted. Jane must have turned over her card. They were clapping, hollering, and laughing; one would have thought they had just won the lottery. Jane must have busted. I had to look now. What a sight it was. Jane had a seven turned

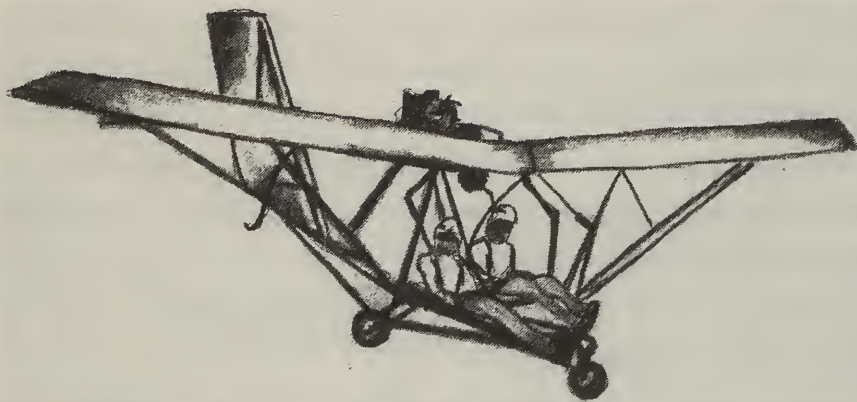
over. I won! We won! It was over. All the tension that had built up inside of me was gone. It was replaced by joy, relief, and satisfaction.

That was it; we were all through. None of us wanted any piece of the new house dealer who was sent by the greedy, evil casino bosses to take back what they perceived as “their” money. Before Jane left, we tossed several chips in the middle of the table to show our appreciation. Between the chips that we were betting for her all along and what we had just tossed her way, she must have accumulated, in a locked box to her right, over a thousand dollars in chips. As happy and grateful as Jane was to have gathered that much loot, she was a thousand times happier to get the hell out of there! All Mr. Death could do was convert our chips to larger denominations and watch us walk away. The mighty house dealer was reduced to being a clean-up boy. That was a beautiful sight to behold.

After the convergence of the chips was done, there was no need for any of us to hang around. Elizabeth, who appeared to be in shock, gave her husband a long, loving hug. She was still not sure if it was a dream or really happening. Tears of joy and astonishment ran down her cheeks. The scene was moving. They casually walked arm and arm toward the cashier’s cage. Marcy, too, started to walk away. She grabbed her huge purse (the size of a carryon suitcase) and her cane and slowly meandered toward the exit doors. She never made it. Halfway there, she plopped her purse and cane beside a slot machine and was getting situated to have a go at a one-armed bandit. Joe felt important now; he decided to hang around the area so he could brag and tell stories to anyone who would listen. He was in heaven. The bullshit that came out of his mouth could have filled a house.

I found myself staring at four pink five-hundred-dollar chips and a few black one-hundred-dollar chips that were safely nestled in the palm of my hand. I had never in my wildest dreams thought that I could get so lucky. It was as if the stars all lined up in just the right spot to allow for

this magical turn of events to take place. I am grateful that I was a part of it—it was an exhilarating, entertaining, and profitable experience.



Day 4 While I was sitting around the pool soaking in the eighty-six degree sun on a windy, clear day, I stumbled across my next adventure. I was scanning through several tourist brochures when I came across an advertisement that was to my liking. I was going to take an ultra-light plane ride. There are several types of ultra-lights. The one the brochure displayed was ridiculously small and was an open-air model (no material covering the occupants or much of anything).

As I was nearing the small, isolated airport in the heart of ranch land at the base of the mountains about twenty miles west of Vegas, I spotted, from my rental car, an ultra-light cruising around overhead. My adrenaline started to flow. I could hardly wait to get up there. My right foot turned to lead, and, before I knew it, I had arrived.

When I arrived, the ultra-light was landing. The landing was frightening to watch. I saw a little, skinny, scraggly-bearded man clutching his right hand on the joystick (the control that steers the plane). The plane was landing on a bumpy, beaten, pitted, dirt path that was being used as a runway. As the plane approached it appeared to me that there was an engine, wings, tail-fin, double seat and three pathetically small wheels—nothing else. Nothing holding it together—just parts. It was coming in fast; it did not look safe. The plane hit the runway. As the pilot was

attempting to compensate for the rough stretch in front of him, it occurred to me that it must feel like an amusement park ride. He would hit a bump and the plane would react. It would bounce off the ground, hit the ground, tip left, right, rock back and forth. In various combinations, this pattern continued until the plane was almost at a stop. I was surprised it did not crash.

I was not sure I wanted to do this anymore—it looked dangerous. However, after talking to my pilot Earl, who just happened to be the pilot of the ultra-light that I just watched land, and asking him several questions, I decided to give it a go.

The take-off was reasonably smooth. I was surprised. I barely felt the impact of the rugged terrain of the so-called runway. Before long, we were off the ground. We were climbing at a slow, even rate. I felt surprisingly relaxed. After a few minutes of climbing, Earl halted the ascent and leveled off the plane. We were cruising at around forty mph but it felt like we were not moving at all. I could feel gusts of wind swirling and cutting around the plane, yet the plane held steady. After a few minutes of cruising, I felt comfortable. I was taking in the sights. I was enjoying being alive. Earl must have sensed this, so he asked if I wanted to man the joystick. I quickly said yes. He gave me quick, concise instructions. Soon afterwards, my left hand was controlling the plane. It felt strange. No sooner did I take the helm than a huge gust of wind attempted to blow the plane sideways, but, to my surprise, a slight nudge of the joystick halted the wind. All remained steady. I maintained a steady ride for a few minutes when I felt the urge to do more than “hold” the joystick. I asked Earl if I could do something more with the controls. As he was pointing to his left, he said, “Do you see that barn over there?” “Yes,” I replied. He continued, “Let’s take a closer look.”

I slowly and cautiously started to turn the plane in the direction of the barn (better safe than sorry). It took awhile to get a feel for the joystick. Eventually, I tricked

the plane into heading in the direction of the barn. I said to myself, "That was easy." Then it dawned on me that it was time to start the descent to the barn. I was not confident about that. I figured if I messed it up we would nosedive, lose control, and crash. But with some coaching from Earl and Earl's hand ready to replace mine on the joystick if something went wrong, I apprehensively started the descent toward the barn. It appeared that we were picking up speed at an alarming rate as we got closer to the ground, but in reality we maintained the same speed. Thank God for that! It was cool. I was proud of myself. The descent was accelerating and fun—I felt powerful. I leveled off the plane one-hundred yards above the top of the barn. We continued to fly at the same altitude for awhile until I asked Earl to return us to the high, scenic altitude that we were cruising at before, for that is the place I wanted to be.

After returning to a high cruising altitude, I wanted to take in the whole experience. No more fooling around. I decided to let go of all my inhabitations and expectations.

Soon afterward, I realized that the view was magnificent and that I was experiencing something special. As time went by, I could feel myself getting lost in the endless sky, becoming an insignificant object in the vast open air—a feeling of being at peace with myself and being removed from reality. I felt free! No worries, no stress, no responsibilities: Nirvana. This is the feeling I was hoping to achieve. This is why I was here.

Day 5 My trip was almost at an end. I had one evening left before I needed to head to the airport to catch my 1:00 a.m. flight, so I planned a simple evening. I would first play, what is generally considered the most exciting game in the casino, craps. Then I would go to the buffet and gorge myself on the multitude of sweets, meats, and whatever else caught my eye, and, with whatever time I had left, drive around Vegas to take in the sights. I am eternally grateful that my evening did not go as planned.

I started the evening at the craps table in the Landmark Hotel Casino. I had no sooner gotten myself situated in

a nice spot standing next to one of the base dealers when two young women approached the table. One woman reminded me of a Barbie doll and the other of a plane Jane (I later discovered that Barbie's real name was Margo and Jane's real name was Susan). They must have just come in from lounging by the pool because Margo had sandals on and was wearing a skimpy two-piece bikini. Susan was wearing tennis shorts and a short-sleeved tee shirt. Margo had bleached-blond hair that hung down to her shoulders, a magnificently golden tanned body, and smelt intoxicating. When the women got to the table Margo leaned over to display her huge, healthy, shapely chest (scantly covered by her bikini top that over 90% of her breasts were exposed) and in a childlike manner and voice stated that they had never played craps before and asked if anyone would be willing to teach them. The game came to a screeching halt. The craps game was now an afterthought to the employees assigned to run it. Male players, dealers, and supervisors were all vying for Margo's attention. They were also waiting, hoping, praying that Margo would make a sudden move so her breasts would have an opportunity to break free from their restraints so they could be viewed by all in their full glory.

With all of the attention given to Margo, Susan was abandoned and left to fend for herself. Partially because I felt sorry for her and partially because I was impressed that she maintained a happy face and demeanor throughout her friend's display, I offered to show her how to play. She looked me directly in the eyes as she was pondering her answer. After a few seconds of contemplation, she said, "Sure."

As she was walking to join me, I took the opportunity to take a more detailed look at her. Susan's appearance was nothing like that of her friend Margo. It was uneventful. She did nothing with her hair (straight, basic cut), wore awkward-looking glasses, had no distinctly womanly scent, and her tan line was patchy and red. Her body was not shapely; she was a four foot, eleven inch twig.

Susan and I were playing for a couple of hours and had our share of drinks. We were getting extremely comfortable being around and talking to one another. Eventually our conversation turned to our experiences in Vegas. I started first. I told her about the ultra-light ride, night golfing, winning at blackjack, and a few more things I thought she would find interesting. She listened intently. Susan was starting to come out of her shell. She was getting excited listening to me describe my adventures. She asked all manner of questions. Since Susan was so receptive to my stories, I decided to tell her about my visit to the brothel. Susan was amazed and happy that I shared that experience with her. She found my experience to be interesting.

At this point Susan felt totally comfortable around me and eagerly started to share her adventures in Vegas. She enthusiastically went on to explain that she had gone on a four-hour ATV tour the day before, a helicopter tour of the city and the Grand Canyon, and a bungee dive off the top of a forty-story building. Wow! I never would have thought that of her. But there was more. After sharing some boring stories about her shopping adventures, she completely caught me off guard. She started to share a personal, intimate experience that she had: Susan received a professional massage with a happy ending. As she put it, "I received the massage from a tall, strong, handsome, Latino hunk named Miguel."

After a few minutes of explaining the experience, it was becoming obvious that she was no longer just simply explaining it. She had begun to relive the experience. She was gazing into space, her eyes were glistening, and she was oblivious to the world around her—she was in a trance. Susan soon started vividly reliving (out loud) specific moments from her experience, "His strong, warm, oil-drenched hands firmly gripped my right thigh, then slid forcefully up and down and around penetrating deep into my flesh as I squirmed inside anticipating where he would turn his attention next." After a few minutes of this, Susan snapped out of the trance and soon realized what

she had said and how she had acted. Clearly embarrassed, she quickly but gently placed her head on my chest and wrapped her arms around me. I was in shock. What was happening? Why did she lose it like that? Was she insane? Did she forget to take her medication?

After the initial shock wore off, I figured out what had happened. Susan was so introverted, conservative, and unworldly that all the experiences of this trip overwhelmed her: an emotional overload. In our earlier conversations, Susan mentioned that she had led a sheltered, uneventful life; she was never asked to a dance in high school, had limited experience dating, had low self esteem, was teased by classmates regarding her appearance, and did nothing out of the ordinary.

It soon dawned on me that Susan and I were much alike in our desire to experience life on our trip. We were here to live, let loose, have fun, gather life experiences, and grow as individuals. Both of us were doing things in Vegas that we would probably not do back home. We were living for the moment, to escape the routine of our normal, duty-laden, responsible, and patterned lives.

I spent the remainder of the evening in Susan's hotel room. The clock was ticking. I was determined to make the next two hours the most memorable, exhilarating, and meaningful memories Susan would have of her adventure.

It was time to leave for the airport. As I was about to enter the elevator, it was time to say goodbye. There was not much to say. We had mentally, physically, and emotionally said good-bye to each other over the last two hours. The elevator door opened. We embraced one last time. As the door was closing, we gave each other a friendly wave and smile. When the door closed, for all intents and purposes, my Vegas adventure had come to an end.

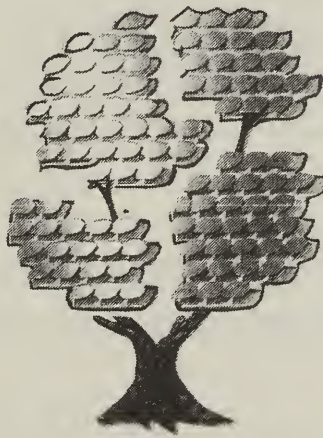
I would be hard-pressed to remember what I had for lunch last Tuesday or what I did on any given weekend a year ago; yet, I remember vividly and fondly the events of my vacation some twenty-five years ago.

PHYLOGENY

Fermin Venzor

History or course of the development and evolution of a race or genetically related group of organisms.

-Webster's Third New International Dictionary-



We cannot hope Phylogeny will explain the morphology of philosophies.

- W.P. Kent-

My body lies motionless there, interred under six feet of earth. It formed for nine months in the womb, destroyed in a minute or two. If people can see me no more, my name will erase from their minds, the projects I started to do, forever will come to a pause.

Some chores I left halfway complete, most hopes and dreams never achieved, I took them with me to the grave, forever locked up in my head.

My mind is discovering new worlds, so strange, I'm just floating out here. I think I'm appointed a guide, who knows, I might be on my own. What language do I have to

Speak? Who tells me which cloak I must wear?
When is it my turn to go see “The One” we must all answer
to?

Enigmas and questions abound, can anyone give me a clue?
Is this place as real as it seems? Perhaps I’m just having a
dream.

My soul knows such places exist, it feels right at home with
this crowd. The beings that pass by my side, they all seem
so bright and advanced. Some don’t look like humans at
all, I wonder what planet they’re from?
I’m thinking, is that how we’ll look when we have evolved
once again?

I sit here and doubt fills my mind. Is this the next phase in
my life? Will I still develop some more? Or is it the end of
the road?

Adios, I must leave you for now, they’re telling me my turn
is up. I’ll try to discover the truth, and vow to enlighten
you some, but just in case we can’t touch base, they
promise, you will get your chance.

Amazing! It’s out of this world! No words can describe
what I’m seeing!

Truck'n

Jason E. Davis

Out for weeks at a time
home for about the same.
Going from the Port of Miami to
Camp Pendleton, Brownsville, Edmonton.

Accident up ahead

Driving from sunup to sundown
is the way it's got to be.
Hauling everything from Army tanks to
cotton pickers, that's how I live my life.

Bear sitting at mile marker 218

Getting up on top of the load
and spreading the tarp as far as it will go.
I have to be careful, watch where I step
no room for mistakes with miles to travel.

*Coast is clear,
hammer down*

*I love my time on the road
but I am really needed at home.
The worst part of this all
is kissing the wife goodbye.*

The Great Hunters

Isaac Searcy

It was opening day of the Missouri deer hunting season and I'd hardly slept all night. I woke up at 4:30 a.m. My older brother, Zeb, was already up. Samson, my younger brother, was still snoring, so I went over and gave him a brotherly punch on the shoulder. "Hey knucklehead, get up!" I said to him. Instantly, he was wide awake, bug-eyed and looking like he had slept less than anyone. I remember my first deer hunt; I probably acted the same, but this was my third hunt and Samson's first. At last, he was twelve years old and could go deer hunting.

The last couple of years had been hard on the little guy; heck, they were tough on me too. Dad, Zeb, and I would pile into Dad's white '79 Toyota pickup and head to Missouri to go deer hunting. I hated leaving Samson behind. My brothers and I did everything together: chores, hunt, fish, ride bikes, play video games, fight, smoke cigarettes, I mean everything! So to watch him stand there with Mom underneath the basketball hoop in our driveway and wave, holding back tears, doing his best to act like a man at ten and eleven years old, was tough on me, as well. He wanted to come along, and I knew the feeling. I too had to stay back in Iowa with Mom while Zeb went on his first two deer hunts.

This time, however, we were all together. Our grandparents lived in northwest Missouri and owned about a thousand acres of land; quite a bit of it was brush, timber, and forest. My dad had hunted the area his whole life and started us boys out doing the same.

We needed to be in our stands by daylight, but it was tradition for Grandma to fix us breakfast. We sat down at the kitchen table and started eating. The television on the counter was turned to the morning news, but was on mute. Every time our spoons scraped the bowls we ate out of or the chairs we sat in creaked, we'd look at the culprit and

frown. I don't know what they were thinking, but I thought, "Dang, can't you guys be quiet! They can probably hear us," thinking about the deer out in the forest, as if they could hear through walls and from miles away. Even Grandma was affected by our anxiety. She treaded lightly across the kitchen linoleum, being sure to pick up her navy blue house slippers with each step, turning the water faucet on low as she rinsed dishes, and quietly shutting cabinet doors.

I was young and so were my brothers: twelve, fourteen, and sixteen. That had a little bit to do with why we were acting the way we were, but not everything. Someone once told me that deer hunting has the power to come over people and possess them, to make them do things they wouldn't normally do. I suppose this was one of those times. As for Grandma and Grandpa, I reckon they sensed we had a mild case of buck fever coming on, so they just fueled the fire by playing along.

After a bowl of hot oatmeal at a quiet kitchen table, we prepared to leave, bundling up in our winter clothes. Grandpa made sure we had our orange vests and hats on. He had been the recipient of a terrible hunting accident many years before while out quail hunting with friends. He felt lucky to still have his legs and always preached hunter safety to us boys.

Finally we were out the door. Grandma quietly called us back to throw a couple hand warmers in our pockets. Then they both whispered, "Good luck."

Each of us climbed up on one of Grandpa's Honda Big Red three-wheelers, guns lying across our laps. We hunted with high-power rifles; I hunted with a .243 and both Zeb and Samson hunted with a .308. Samson sure did look awkward over on his three-wheeler. He wasn't a very big kid, about 5' 2" with finger-length shaggy brown hair, big eyes and an even bigger smile. That three-wheeler dwarfed him but he sure knew how to ride one. We grew up riding them, blazing trails through every acre of Grandpa's land, acting like new-age Lewis and Clark explorers.

As we fired the engines to life, I cringed at the loud beat of their exhaust. Here we were trying to be all quiet and sneaky, only to send earth-thumping sound waves across the pre-dawn sky. Zeb quickly wheeled away heading south. He had about a mile ride across a tilled cornfield to get to his stand. Samson and I went the other direction, our headlights cutting through the darkness. It was about a two mile ride to my deer stand and Samson's was about a mile north of mine. Heading down Grandma and Grandpa's long lane, side by side, I looked over at Sam. He had a grin on his face that expressed pure glee, and eyes that looked like headlights themselves. He was excited, no question about it.

We pulled out on the blacktop and sped up to about thirty miles per hour, tires humming their symphony on the asphalt, and then turned onto an old dirt road. I didn't have far to go and wheeled into a vacant farm house my family calls Cecil Brown's. Grandpa owned the property. No one had lived there for years, but I suppose some guy by the name of Cecil used to. It was a medium-sized white house and an ordinary passer-by probably would have thought someone lived there. Grandma kept it that way, lawn mowed and neat. A small shanty was out back and two great big maples towered over the house in the front yard. I parked underneath those trees, relieved to shut off the obnoxious motor. I could still hear Samson heading down the dirt road to his stand, playing the throttle like it was a musical instrument. Silently, I cursed him for disturbing the peace, (knowing there was nothing he could do about it), yet thinking to myself, why don't you just scream at the top of your lungs, "READY OR NOT, HERE WE COME!"

I could barely see through the darkness, but I knew the area. Setting off for my deer stand, I crossed Cecil's yard and entered a forty-acre hayfield I had to walk across. In the distance I heard Samson kill the engine and now it was silent, almost scary silent. The crunch of dead grass and clover under my feet slowed my pace down to a tip-toe. During the day I wouldn't have thought twice about

crossing an open field alone, but in the dark, well, I just froze up. My head was on a swivel and I truly felt like I was being watched. *What was that?* I heard something and stopped. Listening intently, training my ears to every sound of the night, I quickly scanned my brain for what could be out there: deer, dog, a loose cow. I thought to myself, *What if it was another hunter? What if I'm being hunted?* My heart was beating like a bongo drum and a cold chill went through my core. Not even the gun in my hands could calm the storm of apprehension blowing over my body. I nearly turned and ran, then thought, *Run? You can't run nimrod.* Suddenly I felt stupid tip-toeing around like a child. My clenched nerves released their grip on my legs and I started off for my stand.

All of a sudden, “whoosh,” a covey of quail took flight from right under my feet. “Eegh!” I heard myself scream as I danced the dance of the startled and hit the ground like a fallen tree, rifle tight to my chest. My heart was in my throat as I realized what had just happened. I swear I could hear those quail laughing their little tail feathers off as they flew for cover. “Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha, we got him didn't we; he was so scared; I bet he crapped his pants!” Feeling like the fool I must have looked like, I took off walking with a confident stride that belied the way I truly felt.

Finally, I got to my stand and quickly climbed up the tree. The sun's rays were beginning to peek over the horizon and my eyes adjusted to the early pink and orange light. I was perched in a massive oak and my deer stand looked more like a club-house for kids than a stand to hunt out of. Dad had made it a few years prior with 2 X 4 lumber. It had a four-foot square floor and a built-in seat, with the trunk of the tree to lean back on. Braces had been built in on my left, right, and in front of me to use as gun rests. I sat in my tree, snuggled in the deep corner of the hayfield I had just walked across, forest covering my backside, left and right, and hayfield all out in front of me. Deer liked to come out in the hayfield to graze on grass and

clover. One of the many trails they used to enter the field ran right underneath my stand.

After an hour of scanning my surroundings, my mind began to drift. I sat there staring at the names carved in the giant oak I was perched in. Everyone who had used this stand before me had left their mark: Dad, brother Zeb, cousins Jimmy, Jay, and Josh. I pulled out my buck knife and began carving the name of the greatest hunter of them all. Putting the final touches on my name, I looked up.

Holy shit! There's deer in front of me. Where'd they come from? The thrill of the hunt was coursing through my veins as I looked them over. One, two, three, four deer were standing right there, three does and a little button-buck. I had told myself that this year I was going to get a trophy buck, not just any buck, a big one. I sat there for a time marveling at the beauty of the four deer, wondering where their leader was. Before long, they drifted away.

I went back to daydreaming, thinking about how exciting, yet calming deer hunting was. One minute I'm on the edge of my seat, palms sweating, and teeth chattering; ten minutes later I'm relaxing, just enjoying the morning. And boy was it ever a beautiful morning. The last couple of years had been uncharacteristically cold for the area. Not that year though; the sun was shining at fifty degrees and the wind was barely blowing. I was just sitting there when suddenly...

"Whack, whack, whack, sh, wham, sh, sh!" Something behind me was running through the forest floor, straight at me. I came out of my stupor and sat straight up, back rigid, and thought, *Whatever it is, it's coming swiftly. It has to be the trophy buck, coming to look for his three does. Get ready daydreamer. Act fast; you'll have to shoot him on the run. There he is!*

"What the hell!" I said out loud, as three turkeys came running past. I couldn't believe it. I sat there hating the red-headed little ostriches as they tore across the hayfield on some unknown mission. The thought of blowing their heads off actually crossed my mind, but I

thought of what I did two years before while deer hunting and decided against it. I slipped back into the dreamy state thinking about that incident as the turkeys headed into the timber on the far side of the hayfield.

My first year deer hunting started out as a total disaster. It was unbelievably cold on opening day, so Dad parked his truck about a half-mile from my stand and then he walked three times as far to his own. He said if I got cold to go warm up in the truck because he left the keys in it. Well, sure enough, after only a couple hours I was freezing and went and warmed up my toes in the truck and got jacked up on Dad's coffee. On my way back to my stand a little squirrel came along, jumped up on a clump of dirt protruding from the snow and started chirping at me from about ten yards away. I don't know why, but I suppose because I was young and dumb, and just wanted to shoot something, or maybe I can blame it on all Dad's coffee I drank in the truck, but for whatever reason, I shot it. Two feet of pure-white snow covered the ground and that squirrel painted a pretty gruesome picture all over the top of a fifteen foot circle. As my shot echoed through the land, I quickly thought about what I had just done. I couldn't believe I had acted so impulsively. I got down on my hands and knees and cleaned up the area as best as I could, covering the crimson canvas with fresher, whiter snow. Then I took off for my stand.

It wasn't long before I noticed Dad walking up, all six feet, one inch of him, short brown beard and hat that says, "The Buck Stops Here!" He wanted to know if I had shot a deer. "Yeah," I lied, "I shot at one, but missed." Dad responded, "Well where was he at? I got better trackin' eyes than you and I'll spot the blood if there is any." I lied again and said, "He was right over there," pointing a finger across the hayfield at some timber about fifty yards away.

I felt bad and wanted to tell him what had really happened, but knew he would be pissed, and quite frankly, I was petrified thinking he would stick his size twelve Timberland up my ass if he knew the truth. Dad couldn't

find any deer tracks, let alone any tracks with a blood trail behind them. Finally he called off the search. I think he began to wonder if I didn't just shoot at an imaginary deer by the way he was looking at me and questioning my story. It was getting close to lunchtime, so we headed back to the truck.

As we got close to the spot where I had the run-in with the squirrel I picked up the pace, hoping Dad wouldn't notice the spot in the snow where it looked like someone had been making snow angels. Being the way Dad is, he doesn't miss anything and he didn't that morning either. He slowed up when he saw the snow angels and walked over to the spot. "This is strange," he said, as he started kicking around in the snow. I stood there willing him with my mind to stop investigating. Then he saw something in the snow and kicked it out with the toe of his boot. It was the squirrel's tail.

"What in the..." He looked at me and said in his deep authoritative voice, "Did you shoot a damn squirrel this morning!" Knowing my lies could cover my backside no longer, I owned up to it and received one hell of an ass-chewing.

Coming back to the present and thinking about the turkeys, I decided it was a good thing I didn't make that mistake twice.

I pictured the look on Dad's, Zeb's, Samson's, and my grandparents' faces when I came back to the house with my Missouri record trophy buck. *They're gonna be so jealous. Yep, they sure are.*

"Boom!" a shot rang out in the distance and brought me out of my trance. *Wow, that was close. It must have been Samson,* I thought to myself. He was only a mile away, so either one of us could clearly hear the other if one fired a gun. I was happy for him because he had been so stoked for this hunt. He and I shared a bedroom and every night for the last two months he had talked himself to sleep asking about deer hunting. "What's the furthest you've ever shot a deer from? Have you ever seen one as big as

the one Zeb got his first year? What's the best deer hunting rifle, a .243 or a .308?" I must have answered a thousand questions, or at least I tried to.

"Boom! Boom! Boom!" three more shots were fired. Now I was starting to wonder what in the heck was going on because that was surely Samson again. I climbed down the tree and started walking to the three-wheeler, trying to figure out why he would need to shoot four times. Heck, the clip only held four bullets. Surely he didn't shoot more than one deer. Then I started thinking he may have killed my trophy buck and would get the honor I was dreaming of.

"Boom! Boom!" again shots rang out. Now I was off and running, holding my hat on with one hand and the rifle in my other, picking my boots up high so they wouldn't snag in the grass and clover. "Boom! Boom!" again the crack of the rifle sounded.

My jealousy turned to fear as I ran to Cecil Brown's. I was out of breath, heart bursting, thinking he had to be in a gun fight over there. I jumped on the three-wheeler and raced like Dale Jr. down the old dirt road, dodging pot holes, hitting some, splashing mud and water all over myself.

Arriving at his deer stand, I jumped off screaming his name. "Sam! Samson!" His stand was empty and I was just about to start freaking out when he yelled, "Isaac, over here. I got one." I ran into the timber following his voice. Finding him, I said through each gasp of breath, "What the hell happened? I heard you empty two clips." "Yep," he said, like it was an ordinary way of hunting deer. Then he looked me up and down and said, "Jees, what happened? You look like you fell in the creek."

"Never mind me, why'd you shoot so many dang times?" I demanded. Samson responded with that big smile of his, "Hey, don't get your camouflage all in a bunch. I'll tell ya what happened. A buck came across the clearing on a trot. Bang! I put one in him," he reenacted the scene with the gun at his shoulder. "He staggered from the shot,

but then was off like a banshee.” Samson slowly started walking, presumably to where the deer was. I followed. He started in with the tale again. “I took off after him. He stopped and stared back at me from about fifty yards out; I put three more in him. Staggering like a drunk, he started running again. Can you believe that bro? Four shots and he still wouldn’t go down!”

I started to calm down as he’s telling me this; all I could think of is how Dad always told us boys not to chase a deer after you shoot one. “He’ll just run further.” Clearly Samson had a bad case of buck fever.

“I chased him over this way and put four more in him. That’s when he dropped,” he said, standing there looking proud. *Wow, are you all right little buddy?* I thought to myself. Instead, I said, “Okay, well, let’s get the deer and drag him out.” We headed in that direction. Samson led the way, chest out, a man now that he had killed a deer.

I have to admit, I was a bit apprehensive to find out just how big Samson’s buck was. I mean, what if he killed my trophy, my Missouri record. He’d get all the accolades and I’d be left with what? Nothing! I started to picture it, all the family sitting around talking about the big bucks they had shot and Dad looking over at me saying, “Hey Isaac, tell ‘em about the time you shot that squirrel.”

Walking up to the dead deer, I was relieved to see its small rack, but also felt queasy. I had never seen a blood-red deer before. If I didn’t know better I’d have thought he killed it with a machete. Its hair was matted this way and that, looking like a newborn calf after its mother licks off the afterbirth.

Samson plopped down beside it and held up the head by the antlers. “Nice one ain’t it,” he said. It was a small six point, each antler no bigger than a man’s hand and I thought, *not really*, but said, “yeah,” not wanting to hurt the man’s feelings.

Now we needed to get the deer to the three-wheeler. We were a couple of corn-fed, Iowa farm boys that grew

up slinging hay bales and buckets of corn around, but dragging that deer the length of two and a half football fields, through brush and trees, wasn't the easiest thing to accomplish. Each of us grabbed a side of the antlers and started pulling, hips and heads low, butts out, just like my football coach taught me to push a sled.

After fifty yards, we puckered out. Samson plopped back on the ground and leaned up against his scarlet deer, trying to catch his breath and said, "Damn, there has gotta be a better way to do this." I was huffing and puffing too when I thought of the answer. "Hey, why don't we just gut the deer out now? That'll get rid of at least thirty or forty pounds."

"All right, good idea. You ever done it before?" he questioned. "Sure I've done it. I've killed two deer, haven't I?" The truth of the matter was that I had never gutted a deer by myself. Dad showed me how in previous years, but I wasn't going to admit that. After all, I was the big brother, and the expert.

We rolled the deer over on his back to start surgery, and I tried to remember what Dad had previously told me, but no words of advice were coming to mind, so I just started in like I knew what I was doing. I did remember Dad making one long slit and then pulling all the gory guts out with one pull, clean as could be, making it seem easy. My procedure didn't quite go like that. Samson ended up on his hands and knees, head and shoulders inside the carcass, butt sticking up in the air, retrieving entrails. By the time we were finished, I was amazed that we could possibly butcher that deer any more than it already was. Sam didn't look much better. In fact, with all the blood he managed to get on himself he looked like the deer just gave birth to him.

Finally we got the deer to the three-wheelers and barely managed to get the dang thing up on the back end. Then we headed for the house.

As we rode up the lane, the loud thump of the three-wheeler's exhaust trumpeted our victorious return. We

pulled up to the house as Grandpa and Grandma came out smiling, camera in hand. Their proud faces slowly turned to astonishment, first looking at Sam, then to me, finally to the deer, then at each other. I looked down at my mud-splattered self, then over at Sam and his identical twin, the bloody deer; I opened my mouth to explain but Grandpa cut me off. He turned to Sam and said with his old Missouri drawl, "Boy what happened? That deer redder than a dick on a dog! Your dang finger get stuck on the trigger or what?" Samson had not stopped grinning since the moment we pulled up to the house and his happiness and pride were just too evident. I hopped off the three-wheeler and went over, slapped him on the back, pointed at the deer and said, "Grandpa, that deer must have been the toughest deer to ever cross your land. If it hadn't been for Samson's precise accuracy, he'd of had to shoot it at least eight more times."

“C₁₀H₁₅N”
The Power of Methamphetamine

Joe Cavallaro III

Is it possible for the demon of addiction to
ever find residence in your precious existence?
Your beautiful life is so innocent now....
Childhood dreams and playful laughter and
eyes so trusting only your mommy and I can see.

You were born under the influence of a substance
you know nothing about, and I fear the demon will prevail.
As I watch you grow, I can only hope that your choices
steer you from the places I found myself.

Will you ever turn your back on the ones that love you
and dance with death?
Allowing the beast to live and dwell in you and all that you
do?
Breaking the chains of my own addiction has awakened me
to the possibilities
of your uncharted future, and I wonder....

The power of God will be the
only victory possible
For any of us who surrender to
this satanic power.
Stay strong, my child....



The Beet Scene

Justin Brooks

My grandma was famous for her beets, and everyone in the family ate them for holiday meals. She would never let anyone know her cooking secrets, but I do know that she used a lot of brown sugar. One time, when I was older, I asked her about her famous beets and she said, “I put love into all of my recipes.”

Grandma was a red-headed woman, who was named after her Aunt Zelpha Jean. She was like most red-heads – sharp, intelligent, and feisty. She never had a problem with back-handing anyone who got out of line, especially when it came to the use of poor table manners. Her house rules were always obeyed without question, even having the kids set the table for holiday meals.

Every year Mom and Dad would take us kids from Oklahoma City to Grandma’s house in Heizer. Heizer is a small unincorporated town in central Kansas just north of Great Bend. The town might have three hundred residents but not a single paved road.

Grandma’s house was a five-bedroom, two-story white house that sat on half a block. It was framed with tall maples and juniper hedges. The house was actually passed down to her by her parents, my great-grandparents. They had lived there for nearly thirty years before my grandmother moved in.

It was usually a madhouse at Grandma’s during the holidays. She would slave away at the meal, so it would be finished before the relatives arrived. It was a lot of fun getting reacquainted with cousins that I had not seen for a whole year. We would run through the house until Grandma would order us outside. For some reason, we always ended up fighting with each other and having to be separated.

I will never forget my dear great-great Aunt Zelpha Jean. Everyone called her Aunt Jim for short because her father wanted a boy but never got one, so he just started

calling her Jim. She was a registered nurse when she was younger, but she lost her only child, John, to polio and never stepped another foot into a doctor's office or hospital again. She lived well into her eighties but was never quite the same after her tragic loss. This particular Thanksgiving, she was in her mid-seventies, and we were all delighted to see her. At her side, as always, was her husband, Uncle Earl. They looked like any other older couple. She was short with white hair; he was average height and bald. Every time I saw them, they had on these polyester suits. Aunt Jim's was always pink with a white blouse. Uncle Earl would wear a brown polyester, flannel-looking sports coat, with flat brown slacks and a tan, button-down dress shirt. Their clothing looked like the stuff from a thrift shop. Not that they shopped there, I just think that they hadn't bought any new clothes since the 1950's.

I must have been around ten years old, and Grandma told me to put out the little place cards on the table. Yes, she even had assigned seating. She also said, "Justin, you get to sit at the grown-up table this year." I was astonished at her remark!

My cousins were not even impressed with my graduation. I tried to make them jealous by saying, "I'm a grown-up now. Y'all ain't cause y'all still have to sit at the kiddy table." None of my egging on worked. What did they know? They were just little kids that had to sit at that crummy blue card table with the folding chairs.

The grown-up table sat about twenty and looked prestigious to me. At every place, there were two forks, two spoons, a butter knife, a plate, a cloth napkin, and two drinking glasses. The kids never got to drink out of two glasses in one day, much less in one meal.

After everyone was seated, we started passing the food around. There were turkey, ham, sweet potatoes, mashed potatoes, brown gravy, green beans, carrots, olives, and my grandma's famous beets. Aunt Jim was sitting on my left and Grandma on my right. As the dishes came my way, I helped Aunt Jim with loading up her plate. I felt like

I was truly living up to the “grown-up” role because our plates were piled to the breaking points.

Before anyone could eat, it was time for a moment of silence followed by one of my Uncle Mike’s prayers. Mike is my mom’s tall, lanky, bald brother and is always making jokes and jacking around, so it is hard to take him seriously. Every time he spoke to the family, it seemed like it was off the seat of his pants. His prayers were usually something like this: “Well Father, thank you for all of this food we are about to eat...Um...God, please let those Dallas Cowboys win today...Um...You know, we have all come from a great distance to be here today...so thanks for getting us here safely...Um...Please protect us in the future. Amen!” I remember thinking that I will lead prayer one of these days and do a much better job. We finally started eating after everyone thanked Mike for saying the prayer.

Aunt Jim dug into her pile of food like she had never eaten a day in her life. I still firmly believe if she would have had a shovel, she would have used it. She had already eaten half of everything on her plate, including the beets. The whole table was stunned into silence. Grandma was the first to come out of the trance and say, “Jim, you sure are hungry.”

As Aunt Jim was shoveling another fork full of beets into her mouth, she replied, “Zelpha, this is the”

That was all Jim managed to say because she started choking. This time the whole table was staring in horror, especially me! There were a few comments like, “Aunt Jim are you all right?” I thought to myself, how is she going to answer you? SHE IS CHOKING, PEOPLE! The words, “Somebody help her!” were about to come out of my mouth until she did the most remarkable thing I had ever seen. She let out this burp like someone does that has swallowed too much water at the swimming pool. Along with this burp, not only did the contents of her mouth come out, but everything she had already eaten as well. She was very lady-like about it because not one drop landed on my

grandma's linen table cloth. It all landed back on her plate.

I have always had a weak stomach when it comes to matters like this and usually get sick after watching someone else get sick. I silently said to myself, "Don't look. What ever you do, DON'T LOOK!" I couldn't help myself. My eyes were drawn to it like a tracker beam. The plate was nothing more than a pile of mush and red swirls.

After I was able to pull my golf ball-sized eyes away, I noticed that everyone at the table was still eating. Surely they had seen what I had just witnessed. No one was even looking to the corner of the table where Jim and I sat.

I remember looking at the top of my Uncle John's bald head, and I actually caught him sneaking a peek at the disaster zone across from him. Then he just shoved another fork full of food into his mouth. I thought, if being able to eat, after watching someone get sick at the dinner table, meant you were a "grown-up," I wanted to go back to the kiddy table.

The most amazing part was when dear old Aunt Jim picked her fork up and was preparing to dive back in. Luckily, Grandma stepped in and said, "Oh, Aunt Jim! Here, I'll fix you a new plate."

"Zelpha, I'm just fine. Now you sit down and enjoy your dinner, and I'll just eat this." Aunt Jim said.

I think Jim was very embarrassed about her predicament, and everyone was able to pick up on that by acting as if nothing had happened. Honestly, they were all waiting for the scene to unfold in front of them. Aunt Jim and Grandma were both very bull-headed. I still cannot believe that there was actually a little bit of a tug-o-war over the plate of gruel. Thankfully Grandma was the stronger of the two and wrestled the plate out of Jim's grasp. I almost let out a gasp of relief over Grandma's victory.

Since we were at Grandma's house, with her rules, everyone was expected to ask her to be excused from the table. I had to wait for her to come back. Worst of all, sometimes she would say, "You may not be excused from

the table. You can sit here so everyone can enjoy your company.” Then she would give you that grandmotherly-loving-smile of hers. I really tried to finish eating, but I could not get past the geyser, like Old Faithful, that came out of Aunt Jim’s mouth.

When Grandma was done fixing Jim a new plate, she sat back down and actually started eating again. Everyone was eating! I just knew if I asked to be excused, I would be told, “Finish your plate, honey.”

I felt like screaming, I just can’t do it, Grandma! I just can’t! She must have sensed my discomfort and leaned over to whisper in my ear, “You may be excused from the table, Justin.” I almost cheered with delight as I was leaving the room. I left my full plate of food at the kitchen sink and went outside to play fetch with Ted, my grandma’s chocolate lab. The rest of the day was spent with my cousins asking me questions about the events that transpired at the “grown-up” table.

At the end of the day, with all of the relatives gone, the “beet scene” (that’s what the family calls it now) was brought up while I was watching television with my grandma, parents, brother, and sister. Apparently, Aunt Jim wanted to help Grandma and Mom with the kitchen work. Mom said Jim was absolutely bewildered with all of the food left on people’s plates. She said things like, “Look at this plate Zelpha! Why didn’t people eat their holiday meal? I’ll never understand these young people.”

At the next Thanksgiving Day gathering, Aunt Jim must have been trying to make some kind of new tradition or something because it happened again. Grandma quit making beets for the holidays after this episode. I guess the moral of the story could be: Don’t try to talk and eat my grandma’s famous beets at the same time. Ever!

Glen's Cave

Josh Hurst

An old man named Glen Pinkerton told me a story of a cave that was nestled deep in the Ozark Mountains of southern Missouri. Glen was an old native of the Ozarks. If I ever met a real hillbilly it was him. He owned an ancient cedar sawmill that he had made a living off of for forty years. All the years I knew him, I never saw him wear a pair of shoes. His feet were completely black and covered with sticky cedar sap, evidence of the many years of his trade. I don't know if Glen owned only one pair of clothes or if he just had a bunch of the same outfit. The only clothes I ever saw him wear were these blue overalls. He didn't even bother with wearing a shirt underneath. To top off the outfit he wore an old brown leather hat.

I met him when I was about five years old and every time I saw him he had a story to tell. He told me about noodling for catfish on the old White River and claimed one particular catfish of about thirty pounds nearly took his life in no more than six and a half feet of water. He said, "You wouldn't believe how strong one of dem cats is till one latches on to your arm an goes to rollin'. It don't take you long spinnen round like that before you can't tell the difference from up and down. That old cat had me worried for a few, if my breath wouldn't have lasted longer than his fight, I wouldn't be here to tell you 'bout it." I believed every word too because he had the scars on his arms to prove it.

During and shortly after the great depression he said he made ends meet by trapping furs with dead fall traps. As he told me of the dead fall traps he walked me through the woods and it didn't take long until we came to a rocky cedar glade where he flipped a big flat glade rock up on one end. While still holding one end of the moss-covered rock he reached into his pocket and pulled out three delicately carved wooden sticks and demonstrated how to

set the primitive trap. He even bought me a youth model Remington .22 rifle when I was six years old and taught me how to hunt and live off the land. But of all the stories and lessons I learned, I wanted to hear more about this mysterious cave.

He told me all about it, but said “You’re too young to climb off in a cave yet, boy.” He claimed he used to go so deep into it that he would come out under the White River. He said, “At one time I was gonna open’er up to da public, but she was too far outta da way for anyone to come.” He even claimed to have poured a concrete slab over the sink hole and made a doorway entrance. I learned the directions to the cave after hours of persuasion. He had told me to walk up old dry holler until I found a pond and then head up the hill from there. He said, “When you reach the top of the hill, take a left on the old logging road and stay on it until you find a huge red oak tree with three trunks. Then head over the hill towards cedar creek. Make sure you walk straight or you’ll miss her and watch where you’re walkin’ or you’ll just fall plum off in it.” He had promised to take me and show me his secret cave when I got older, but he never got the chance. Glen passed away when I was nine years old.

Over the years I missed Glen’s old stories. I wondered if there really was a cave up there on the side of that hill. One day, ten years later, my curiosity got the better of me and I grabbed a maglight, batteries, rope and water and set out to investigate this legend once and for all. I soon learned he was right about one thing: it was sure out of the way. I followed his instructions and when I found an ancient oak with three trunks I began to wonder if it was more than just a legend. When I went down the hill I didn’t expect to find anything at all, but I almost found it the hard way. I came one step from falling right in it. I sat at the top edge of the sink hole and looked down at a rather eerie looking doorway at the bottom of the hole. The doorway was covered in moss and had a small tree growing up beside it. After I sat there and thought about old Glen

Pinkerton and how long it would have taken him to pack that much concrete this far back in these hollers I decided I better have a look.

I took out my rope and tied it off to the nearest sturdy tree and began to work my way toward the moss-covered door way. When I got to the doorway and tied myself off I took out my flashlight and decided to have a look inside this cave that I had waited over ten years just to see if it existed. As soon as my light came on I knew why Glen had told me I needed to wait until I got older before he would show me. There was a hole about ten feet around that went straight down at least fifteen feet. This dropoff did not stop me; I pressed on into the cavern.

Once I reached the bottom, I took in all that was around me. The floor of the cave where I stood was a crimson clay bottom sprinkled with black, which I soon discovered was bat guano. I heard dripping sounds up ahead of me; as I followed the sound my flashlight soon illuminated the beautiful stalactites reaching for the bottom and the stalagmites protruding from the floor. It is truly amazing how dripping water enriched with minerals can create such breathtaking formations. I continued to explore this beautiful cave for hours that day and many days since then, but to this day I have never found the end.

I solved the mystery of this long-forgotten cave and every time I go there I remember my old hillbilly friend Glen Pinkerton. I will never forget old Glen. He was a man from an era long gone, but never forgotten.

Letter from Bill Kloefkorn

April 1, 2008

Hello Jim,

I have been trying to recover from a bout with bronchitis, and at the moment I think I am going to win on points. But the bout gave me time to read and consider the comments your students addressed to me, and now I feel well enough to respond.

First: I thank all of those who took the time to write and to type the comments. I very much appreciate their directness, their honesty, their clarity. It is especially gratifying to learn that they are enjoying the class, and that some of them are beginning to enjoy not only the reading of poetry, but the writing of it as well. For me, the two—the reading and the writing—go hand-in-hand. If I am in a writing slump, I put down the pen and take up the book—a collection of poems, say, that I have never read, or maybe one that I have read several times but want to return to. Or maybe I browse a periodical that arrives in the mail (I subscribe to only three or four). And sooner or later I come across a poem that hits me in the gut no less than in the neocortex. Here is the most recent example, a poem by Linda Pastan in the Spring issue of the *Virginia Quarterly Review*:

INSOMNIA

I remember when my body
was a friend,

when sleep like a good dog
came when summoned.

The door to the future
had not started to shut,

and lying on my back
between cold sheets

did not feel
like a rehearsal.

Now what light is left
comes up—a stain in the east,

and sleep, reluctant
as a busy doctor,

gives me a little
of its time.

Now, in my head, I am working on a poem that, should it happen, will owe its birth to Linda Pastan's poem. And as I continue to think about my own poem, I know that I can return to "Insomnia" for further encouragement. I'm not sure what it is about the reading of others' work that so frequently sets off a spark. One possibility is that a word or a phrase or a figure of speech hits home. "The door to the future" that opens the third stanza is so appropriately trite; it reminds me of the motto that my senior class adopted: "With the ropes of the past we will ring the bells of the future." Ah, such high hopes! But what happens when the ropes break? Anyway, the mind reacts to words and lines and metaphors in curious ways, and a rough draft of a poem begins to pester the imagination. Another possibility is that the poem reminds the reader that restlessness is a common concern, that we are fallible creatures who suffer from one thing or another, and one way to cope is to write about the ailment with dignity and forthrightness, giving the subject a treatment free of whimpering and whining and self-pity. I have insomnia, the poet says, but by Christ I yet can manage to wrangle some early-morning sleep, can have it visit me—like the overburdened physician—for a few minutes or hours. I can't cure my insomnia, perhaps,

but I can handle a metaphor with grace and freshness. Well, I read such a poem and it encourages me to confront my own challenges as gracefully and as freshly as I possibly can. Reading the work of others, then, is a major type of motivation.

I also want to thank those who did not send a response but perhaps thought about it. I am grateful for the intention as well as the deed.

Now here are some more specific responses.

Joe Cavallaro: These sentences stood out: “I’ve never thought too highly about my own abilities to write. But as I progress through this, my confidence is building. I would have to give thanks to Dr. Reese, and the guest speakers I’ve met in class...” Yes, indeed. And while you are at it, Joe, give thanks to yourself for having the insight to realize that your confidence is growing. Your comments make it obvious that you can write. So do it.

Juan Zuniga: The Nebraska State Poet is an honorary designation—no pay from the state, and no demands. I like that. I am therefore free to continue to do what I did before I was appointed—namely, write as well as I can, and represent writing respectfully and with vigor, whether I am talking to a class of fourth-graders at Pershing Elementary in Lincoln, a clutch of graduate students at Bumfuck University in New Jersey (I made that up), or an attentive group of writers and artists at a Federal Prison Camp in Yankton, South Dakota. And it pleases me that you too think that irony is “one of the great wonders.” The fattest man in my little hometown carried the nickname of “Slivers.” Small-town irony. Slivers thought it amusing, and forgave us for being so amazingly clever. And, yes, Jesus did own a dog. A pit bull. Its name was Rover.

Hung Dao: Hey, I like what you said about substituting a good habit for a bad one—that is, my dropping the bottle and in its place picking up the pen. And you are correct when you say that it isn’t the age of the

writer that matters; it's the writing itself. I absolutely agree. I have written poems with third-grade students that were much better than many of the poems written by geezers in elderhostel workshops. Write whatever seems right to you. I am glad that you remembered this advice. Don't forget it.

Justin Brooks: "Can you give me any little hints on being able to understand poems more?" Good question. Hint #1: Don't be discouraged if a given poem doesn't connect. Give it a chance, then another, then maybe one more. Then move on to something else. There is more than one type of fish in this vast and impenetrable sea. Hint #2: Read and talk about a tough poem with someone who likewise has some difficulty understanding poems. Read it to him. Have him read it to you. Mull it over together. Maybe he can help you into an understanding of the poem; maybe you can do the same for him. If this doesn't work, shrug your shoulders and move on. As I said earlier, there is more than one type of fish.... Hint #3: Seek out a wide variety of poems—long ones, short ones, poems for children, poems about dogs, poems about love, poems that rhyme, poems that do not rhyme, poems that have been around for a long time, poems that are contemporary, and so on. Google some poems by Dave Etter. And Hint #4: Don't feel that "understanding" a poem is the same as solving a poem. A good poem suggests more than it spells out. And what it suggests to you might be quite different than what it suggests to someone else. Okay?

Todd Bowlin: You wrote, "Your poetry showed me a poetry I could understand." Excellent. Several of you said this, and each time I hear or read it I am pleased. Poetry does not have to be scholarly or difficult to be thought-provoking. Robert Frost's poems, many of them, are very understandable, yet they invite us to think about the ways in which the poems connect with our own lives. Have Jim Reese read you "After Apple Picking," for example. Better yet: Have him Xerox a copy for each of you, then the next day talk about the extent to which the poem makes sense. And, yes, we Kansas boys must stick together, whether we

hail from a village or a city!

Ryan Nordstrom: Ah, revision! How Many? How many, that is, for a short story or a piece of non-fiction—since those are the genres you are most interested in. Well, I do a lot of revising, both as I move along and later, after I finish a rough draft. But “reasonably clean” doesn’t satisfy. It’s like saying, “Well, I have this vehicle in excellent shape, except for the carburetor.” Nope. Better keep tinkering with that carburetor if it takes until Hell freezes over to get it precisely adjusted. I know this can be frustrating. You just have to be tenacious and a trifle bullheaded. I like to give the draft a cooling-off period, maybe half a dozen of them. Put it aside. Shoot some pool. Take a hike. Sing the opening songs of five of your favorite songs. Record the first names of the girls in your high school graduating class. Then return to the rough draft. I know it is easier to offer this advice than to put it into practice. But the story’s eventual existence depends upon you endurance. And good luck!

Isaac Searcy: You posed a very basic question: “How exactly do you go about starting your poems?” I can’t do justice to this question without writing a book, but I can maybe give you one specific example. I begin many of my poems by reacting to something that has fired my imagination, something that provokes me into thought, something that I believe needs to be further sustained or denied or quibbled with or whatever.

Yes, I told one of your classmates earlier, Jesus did own a dog. The question, as I noted in class, was posed by Snoopy, but Charlie Brown didn’t respond. So the question hung in the final frame of the comic like a challenge. Okay, then, I’ll challenge it and say in my opening lines “Of course he owned a dog. Wasn’t he, / after all, / human? Or was he less human than / divine, too divine, that is, / to stoop to the level of picking fleas / from the lopsided ears / of rover?” And where might I go from there? Damned if I know. But somewhere. I’d go somewhere. Maybe this: “Of course he owned a dog. / Never mind that no dog is

mentioned / in the Scriptures, so many words having been / devoted to the higher achievements—water / walked on, Lazarus resurrected, / fish and bread multiplied / enough for the multitude, / water into wine.” You write, hoping for momentum. You read what you have written. You read it again. Something clicks. You write some more. “Yes, yes, I know: He hobnobbed / with the poor, but foresaw / that, for all our efforts, / the poor would be always / with us. He must therefore / have known that man’s best friend / would be, for those legions of needy / wretches, a necessary if not holy / consolation, must therefore have displayed / his own canine companion, a description of which / must have been deleted / by scholars who viewed the lower animal / as the lower animal. Saying this, I herewith / join a long if not honorable line / of extrapolators. Give unto us a break, the poor / must have said, and Jesus, Rover / at his feet like the faithful friend / his master’s father breathed the breath of life / into, must have told his faithful friend / to demonstrate what it means to be obedient, / to roll over, that is / when commanded, and play dead.” That’s it, maybe. Then you fine-tune. But the poem, whether good or ill, is the result of a reaction to something that ignited the imagination. I know this is a long-winded example, but it’s nonetheless shorter than a full-blown book. I hope it helps.

Fermin Venzor: I might have mentioned, in class, that my younger brother taught at PPCC for many years (GO AARDVARKS), and he might have been there when you graduated. You ask why I didn’t title any of the poems in *Alvin Turner*. Well, I tried titles, but they seemed awkward—because I want the book to suggest that Alvin is thinking about his life somewhat randomly (so in one poem he is in the distant past, then in the next poem he is in the present as his mind moves rather freely over time and space)—and titling the poems seemed to me to make the process unduly formal and rigid, as if he is deliberately titling his thoughts. So I simply numbered them, more or less for the convenience of the reader. But in other books I do have to wrestle with titles, as you say you wrestle with

them also, and sometimes it is difficult to find one that truly fits. Two suggestions: 1) Don't settle on a title that explains things too explicitly; give the reader the privilege of doing some thinking for him or herself. And 2) Consider something simple, if it fits—maybe the date of the event the poem deals with, as for example “Early October” or “One Sunday Morning, 2001” or “Yankton, After a Heavy Rain,” or “On Highway 14 Just South of Valentine.” You get the point. There will always be those pesky poems that just don't want to be titled. Call the first of these “In Praise of the Poem that Refuses to be Named.”

Brandon Buster: I went into the Marine Corps shortly after I graduated from college. Then I taught high school for one year, after which I returned to college to complete a MA degree. I had a professor who encouraged me to write. I wanted to write the great American novel, but instead I wrote the not-so-great American novel—for my master's thesis—and fortunately it was not published. But I'm glad I wrote it. You can learn a lot, sometimes, by plunging in and finishing the project. And, yes, I know what you mean when you say that “some poems and prose pieces seem inundated with detail....” Too much, maybe, or at other times too little. I'd suggest including plenty of details, and then use your best judgment as you select this detail and reject another. Your being aware of this as a problem should give you an edge when it comes to solving the problem. And, no, this was not the first time I had been in a prison environment. I am not very thoroughly schooled in such environments, though I have conducted a couple of workshops in a penitentiary in Ohio, and I have taught some classes at the penitentiary here in Lincoln. Willie Otey, the last inmate to be executed in Nebraska, was one of my students. He wrote some good stuff. Thanks for your questions. I was impressed with the attentiveness of your class, and with the responses to what I was saying.

Michael Clennon: Yes, indeed: A series of poems can provide an extended story, a story that somewhat resembles a novel, except that there are some rather

wide gaps that the reader is expected to use his or her imagination to fill. *Alvin Turner* is such a book, and I have half a dozen others that fit into this category. (Jim Reese has read all of them.) I am pleased that you returned to *Huck Finn*; it is a wonderful book. And I appreciate your comments about evaluating what you read and/or write. My suggestion: read and write thoughtfully, but don't strain too much to evaluate. And, finally, I hope you will continue to question things and look at subjects from a variety of angles. To consider several perspectives is one way to discover fresh and exciting outlooks—and these, in turn, can be reflected in your writing.

Dane Yirkovsky: You are a genuinely talented artist. I'd swap half my acreage in Paradise for such talent. Now you might consider doing a book with some original prose or poetry to complement some original paintings. The book in which I wrote some poems to accompany paintings done by a Nebraska artist is titled *Still Life Moving*. I believe that Jim has a copy. Borrow it. Look it over. Then do one of your own. If you don't feel up to writing the prose or poems, collaborate with someone. Do it. And good luck!

Lee Dagostini: You pose an interesting question: "Why do poets not write much prose and vice versa?" Many poets with whom I rub shoulders do write some prose, but not many of them are very successful. And the same goes for prose writers who attempt poetry. There are exceptions, of course. John Updike is a superior writer of both genres, but the list of such exceptions is not very long. Why? I don't know. William Faulkner, surely one of the finest novelists this country has known, tried his hand at poetry, and failed miserably. His poetry is in his prose. It seems that some imaginations are simply more expansive than others, that the prose imagination prefers, or demands, the extended hike over the ten-second sprint. I personally enjoy trying both approaches. I sometimes write a poem that satisfies me, as a poem, but would like to be more developed as a story. So I give it a shot. That's what we do, many of us. We give each genre an honest effort to see what

happens. My high school basketball coach offered this bit of wisdom: "Never up, never in." You don't make a basket unless you put up a shot. Even then, you might not fluff the nylon. But what does the best shooter on the team do when he has missed a dozen consecutive attempts? He tries again.

Scott Kirk: Your concern about the many complexities of certain poems is one that many others have voiced; it obviously is a very troublesome aspect. But don't let the complex (or more likely obscure) poem force you into an over-reaction; that is, don't let it compel you to make your own writing unduly simplistic. I frequently run into poems that leave me stone-cold, or dazed, or clueless. Maybe it's the poem, or the poet behind the poem trying, as you say, "to out-do the next poet." It happens. Or maybe I just don't have the wherewithal to understand what the hell is being said or suggested. I am totally no whiz-kid. I am not a certified academic. I am pretty much a country boy with manure still clinging to his loafers. So I brush off the poem and leave the manure where it is. I find poems that seem to have been written by hayseeds like me, and I read them and take whatever I can from them and try then to write poems that I believe others like me can make something of. I don't want to insult anyone's intelligence with a poem that preaches; but on the other hand I don't want to leave the reader standing alone in the darkness. Does that seem like a reasonable compromise? Write your poems in free verse or in conventional rhyme and meter (better yet, try both approaches), and rely upon your own sense of what is and what isn't understandable. You'll never be able to reach everyone, but those that you do manage to make contact with will appreciate that you and they are on the same frequency.

Josh Hurst: One of your comments echoes those that Scott and two or three others offered: "...sometimes I have trouble understanding poetry when I read it, but I thank you for making yours clear to me." You are welcome. It is always good to hear that one's poems are being taken in, not tossed out because of vagueness or lofty and

obfuscated language. And you also said, “I liked how most of your poetry comes from people, places, situations that you have encountered throughout your life.” Good. So I recommend that you too write about those people and places and events that were, and perhaps continue to be, special to you. You must have had some intriguing experiences growing up in the Ozarks. Don’t sell any of them short. If they are significant to you, and you write about them clearly and freshly, they will be significant to many of your readers. “Anything looked at [written about] significantly will be significant,” wrote critic and poet John Ciardi. I agree with him wholeheartedly.

Jason Davis: Now here is a sentence from your letter that hit home: “I have written a few poems myself and I had a very good time writing them.” Bravo! That’s one helluva good reason for writing a poem—both process and product can give you a sense of accomplishment, a sense that you have created a type of order by putting words together, whether the poem is light or heavy, uplifting or deflating. And you ask how you might get a poem started, get it off the ground. I talked about this earlier when I attempted the poem that contends Jesus had a dog. Read this section again, then maybe in class you can talk about the approach, and about other possible approaches that no doubt will come to mind as the discussion moves along.

Justin Bollig: I reckon I didn’t start writing poems until I was thirty-seven because 1) I lacked confidence, and 2) I was content to let the well accumulate as much water as possible before depleting it. I started because I read a couple of contemporary poets I hadn’t read before, and their poems connected, and I girded my loins and jumped into the fray. Young or old or somewhere in between, you start when you feel ready to start. The important thing is to respect the feeling; don’t deny it or delay it. You write your first poem, and you revise it until you are satisfied with it, and then when you write another you discover that it is maybe just as tricky as the first one. And it remains that

way. So you acknowledge this and keep at it. Don't let the bastards grind you down, whoever or whatever the bastards might be. It's your poem. You have the words to make the poem work. And if you can add to this a personal devotion to perseverance, you can surprise yourself. And others. And the effect can be downright gratifying.

Mario Covington: Thank you for the following: "...you gave me hope that it isn't too late to succeed in writing." This is a major, major realization, one that I trust you will keep in mind as you put the pen to the paper. You don't need to write an entire bookshelf of poems; you should be pleased and proud if you write half a dozen, or a dozen, or whatever. So write the poems and tell the stories and share them with your world, however extensive or non-extensive that world might be. And, again, I thank you for your forthright realization.

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Jim: I have not done sufficient justice to the comments and questions, but perhaps some of the observations will help. I hope so. You have an impressive group of students, and they are equally fortunate to have you as their professor.

Cheers!

Bill Kloefkorn

Chicken Noodle Soup

Hung Dao

I was vacationing in the countryside of South Vietnam in 1997, and staying at my uncle's house about a half hour away from Vung Tau. Everybody in Vietnam gets up at six o'clock in the morning and takes a nap in the afternoon. Personally, I do not require an afternoon nap because this is when I am usually getting out of bed! I believe the reason for napping is the afternoon temperatures reaching triple digits, along with the stifling humidity.

I was sitting on the front porch when Vinny pulled up on his little motorbike. His tall, undernourished, dark-skinned, toned frame dismounted the motorbike and came towards me. I noticed he was wearing a bright green polo t-shirt with some ripped-up blue jeans and was bare-footed, not wearing the customary slippers.

Vinny was the son of a friend of my uncles. He was about my age or maybe a few years older, all of sixteen years old. When he showed up unexpectedly, my uncle told him to show me around the countryside.

Vinny asked me, "Are you hungry?" I replied, "Yeah, what is there to eat?" "Chicken noodle soup!"

I did not care what we were going to eat because I was starving. I ran in my room to grab some money and put my slippers on before hopping on the back of his little bike. We rode north on the main paved road for about ten minutes until we reached the jungle of Vietnam. The dirt road in Vietnam was not brown, but dark, a dirty red color.

Within minutes, trees surrounded us. It reminded me of an argument we had a week prior. Vinny pointed out a group of trees and told me they were rubber trees. I laughed and stated there is no way those trees are made of rubber; they are real trees, made of wood. He then explained to me that the trees produce rubber, hence are called rubber trees. The rubber was actually sap from the trees and Vinny along with his mother collected rubber

twice a day to earn a living.

Each tree had a deep carving down the middle, running from top to bottom, and there was a small piece of metal inserted at the base of the tree (about a foot from the ground) for the sap to drain out and into a coconut bowl.

As we were getting deeper into the jungle of rubber trees, the foliage created a canvas that crowded the sunlight because the trees and shrubs were very thick. Vinny shut off the engine and let the bike glide us to a stop. When the bike was at a complete stop, I hopped off. I thought he had to go urinate or something because there was no restaurant or any people in sight!

I then asked him, "What are we doing here?" He said, "Catching a chicken for chicken noodle soup!"

As I looked around, there were small families of chickens roaming around feeding. Vinny reached in his left pocket, pulled out a handful of rice grain and threw it on the ground about ten feet in front of him. I observed the flocks of chickens coming closer to feed. He then reached in his right pocket and pulled out a homemade V-shaped slingshot with a rubber band on it.

He asked me, "Which one do you want?"

I said, "The fat one right there," pointing to a severely overweight chicken waddling to the rice grain.

It was about twenty feet away. I started to laugh a little as I watched Vinny position himself like a hunter holding a big shotgun, and I doubted he could hit a tree six feet in front of him, let alone a chicken over twenty feet away.

Swoosh. "Bloocck-clloocck..."

The flock of chickens scattered away, but the big fat chicken lay on its side, unconscious. He told me to turn the bike around to get ready to head back to his house while he ran over and grabbed the chicken by its feet.

When I got the bike turned around, I looked back; Vinny took his shirt off and wrapped it around the chicken's head and body leaving the feet exposed, so he could grip them. He hopped on the bike holding onto my shoulder

for support with one hand and holding the chicken with his other hand. Vinny yelled, "To my house!"

As we were heading back, the chicken became conscious and started twitching. It started nipping at my back, as its head was placed right between my shoulder blades. I told Vinny to grab its head because it was making me nervous and I almost lost control of the bike.

We arrived at Vinny's house ten minutes later; he handed me the chicken by its feet and hopped off before I could get the little motorbike to a complete stop. Vinny ran inside the house and came out with a butcher knife in one hand and a bowl in the other, explaining that he had to go check on the two boiling pots of water that he had started before he came to pick me up some twenty minutes ago.

He then told me to bring the chicken over and made me hold it by its feet so he could cut its neck. As the chicken hung upside down, it was twitching while Vinny collected the draining blood into a bowl. After a minute or so, it stopped twitching and Vinny told me to keep draining the blood into the bowl as he ran into the kitchen to check on the boiling pots of water.

I noticed that there was barely any blood coming out of the chicken's neck, so I decided to let go of it and lay it on the ground, assuming it was dead. As soon as I stood up, the chicken rose to its feet and started to walk around in circles with its head hanging on its neck, then collapsed.

Vinny carried a pot of hot water out of the kitchen and placed on the ground. He grabbed the chicken by its feet, brought it over to the pot of water, and dipped the chicken head first in the pot. He let the chicken sit in the pot for a few minutes and pulled it back out. He then started plucking the feathers off the chicken, carefully trying not to get scalded by the steam. He told me to go into the kitchen and cut two onions in quarters while he finished plucking the chicken.

As soon as I was done cutting the onions, he came in holding the dead and featherless chicken. He threw the chicken in the pot along with some sugar, salt, and msg.

He told me to throw the chopped onions in the pot while he went outside to get the bowl of chicken blood. When he returned, he dumped the bowl of blood into the boiling pot of chicken. He opened two packages of ramen noodles and put them into two separate bowls. Vinny yelled, "Let's get ready to eat!" I asked him, "Aren't you going to cook the noodles first?" He replied, "Don't worry."

He grabbed the bowl of noodles, brought it over to the pot, and scooped two scoops of broth into the bowl and a few pieces of chicken. When he brought my bowl of chicken noodle soup, I just stared at the bowl of soup for about five minutes. It looked dirty, the broth was brown, and it smelled weird too. I tried to taste it and scalded the roof of my mouth; it was so hot the chicken was literally falling off the bone.

He asked, "Is it good?" I said, "Yeah, but it's too hot to eat, I'll just let it cool down a little."

I was nervous at first just looking at it because it was so filthy. I was thinking about the bird flu disease, at the same time remembering that I did not see Vinny wash the chicken before he tossed it into the pot. I doubt Vinny even washes his hands before or after doing anything!

I tried to clear my head and concentrate on eating because I was so hungry. I was blowing my bowl to cool it down before tasting the broth with my spoon. It tasted good, even with all the dirt and some feathers floating in my bowl. I then used my chopsticks to pick up a piece of meat and started blowing to cool it down. As soon as it looked somewhat cool, I threw it in my mouth and started chewing away. At first, I did not know what to expect, but it tasted like sweet-filleted chicken breast in a soup.

It was one of the best tasting chicken noodle soups, even though it looked foul and smelled very weird. Besides spitting out the bones and the loose feathers, I did not care; it was simply delicious. I took one bite after another; I even sipped all the broth from the bowl. Vinny made me two more bowls and ate two more bowls himself. He said, "You know why it was so good?" I replied, "No" and kept

on eating. He said, "Because it was free, that is why it was so delicious."

Bridgeman Street

Brandon W. Buster

Grandma and Grandpa live in the last house on a quiet dead end street which ends abruptly at their driveway. The road itself is shy of a two lane and with cars parked on both sides; you almost have to grease the sides of a vehicle to get through. Fittingly, this is our place of refuge for the holidays. Since we have a huge family, cars are parked behind the house in a makeshift parking area that has developed over the years. The overflow extends clear up to the stop sign, bumper to bumper, lining both sides with tires resting on a portion of the sidewalks. I often wondered what the neighbors thought and could hear their expletives as they struggled to find parking space other than their own driveways. This gave the appearance of a block party and it usually wasn't too short of that.

Inside the chaos was thriving. The men huddled around the TV watching any football game they could find and discussing in vivid detail their respective hunting seasons. This was a time when we could razz one another about missed shots, puny deer taken just to avoid getting skunked and who was caught sleeping in their stands. We all anticipated Uncle Steve's arrival with his freshly scored trophy buck. I swear, every year he showed up with a deer in the back of his truck. Personally, I think he slips down to the game farm just outside of town and bags his prize, but of course he will never divulge his sacred spot or allow anyone to go with him. I have heard him make the comment on several occasions that there sure are some fine looking racks down at Bob's. I am going to take a stab and say he was referring to Bob's Game Farm. When he finally shows up he reeks of doe piss and has on war paint like some scene out of the Rambo series gleaming from ear to ear. His hair is an unnatural three-tone reddish, brownish, orange color from a botched attempt at a dye job to cover the solid grey. "Got a beer?" He asks. "I sure the hell am

thirsty. I had to drag this monster quite a ways back to the truck all by myself. We've got to get these back straps cut out and thrown on the grill." He whips out a buck knife that would make Crocodile Dundee squirm and begins to hack out the straps.

The women are sipping wine, discussing who is sleeping with whom, marriages and divorce, taking a page from an episode of Jenny Jones. Grandma sits there smiling and listening to all the gossip around her. To look at her, you would wonder what was on her mind: her white hair fluffy and those deep blue eyes shining like stars through her spectacles. I just think she was thankful to have everyone in her home and safe for the holidays.

Most of the food was already prepared and brought to the big potluck. Everyone was known for something, either a dessert, deviled eggs, or Grandpa's ham and beans. The ham and beans were good, but they were known more for the toxic gas they left in our wake. Thankfully, it wouldn't kick in until later in the evening and the people still around were usually on their way to a good buzz so it became more of a sport than a nuisance.

Dinner was usually a blur. With so many people in such tight quarters, it gave the appearance of a fend-for-yourself atmosphere. Grandma would holler, "Come and get it!" reminiscent of a cattle call as everybody stampeded to the kitchen and entered the serving line. Tables were lined up end-to-end with the main course, side dishes, and finally desserts. Bonanza would have been proud of the structure and the quantity of food. Chatter filled the air and the smell of food lined the inside of your nose. If you weren't hungry before getting in line, you would find a reason to eat something. With plates piled high, everyone returned back to their spot to begin shoveling down the grub. Just like high school cafeterias, we all had our little posse that we sat with. It was like an understood separation from the group and nobody ever mentioned it. To an outsider, it would have seemed very strange, but to us it's the way it was.

The present opening was fairly orchestrated and to ease the length, we had a gift exchange. Back on Thanksgiving, we would draw names and iron out the details so that nobody was left out. We would always have the situation where there was now an ex something or other and his or her name would be methodically crossed off and the new person was added; part of life I guess. This was more for the kids than the adults, but we all liked to give each other a little something as well. The camcorder was rolling and paper started flying. The kids would hold up their presents and politely thank whomever it was that got them their gift. They would drag the toys into the basement and begin playing with their new gadgets, instantly becoming firemen, racecar drivers or teachers. For the adults, the fun was just beginning.

We would do a thorough check on the alcohol status and make one last beer run before the stores were to close for the day. Luckily, Red kept his gas station open for this occasion. I would usually be the one to make the trip and every year when I arrived I was the only one in the station with Red closing right behind me. He would be sitting on an old armless stool watching a small black and white TV which had rabbit ears extending four feet into the air, laced with aluminum foil. He wore an old DX ball cap soiled with grease and dirt, a lined flannel shirt with the stuffing exposed around the elbows and a saggy pair of Rustlers. His grey beard hanging down about a foot from his chin, almost touching his protruding gut, made me think that with a shower and a manicure he would make a good Santa. I asked him, "Red, do you purposely wait for me every year?" He said, "Kid, it's like clockwork, now go on ahead and have a good time." "Merry Christmas Red," I would say and slip him an extra hundred— no wonder he waited for me.

Back at the house the tables were cleared and the gambling was to begin. The front and back doors were hinged open to allow the air to flow, in part to reduce the temperature, but mainly to alleviate the stale remains of the

ham and beans. Grandpa had an old double-barrel wood burner in the basement with no thermostat and felt the need to keep it stoked and spewing out the heat.

We would have one table for cards, euchre or pitch and another table for Jenga. The Jenga table was much more interesting and entertaining. Jenga is a game of patience and a steady hand. Rectangular pieces of wood are freely placed together in threes. The next section is placed on top rotated 90 degrees. The object is to withdraw one piece at a time and start a new section on the top. We would all put one dollar in the kitty and stand around the oval table. Drink in hand, one by one we would remove the wooden pieces and begin to build the tower of Babel. The last person to successfully complete a move would win the pot, while everybody else would have to take a shot of some liquor; the person who wrecked the tower took a double-shot.

Everyone stood almost motionless as each person took a turn. Eyes were focused on the tower looking for and anticipating the slightest wobble. Once the piece was placed on the top, you could feel the exhale and the drinks were raised as if in a successful cheer to the victor. In the background Grandma and Grandpa were nestled tightly on the piano bench giving us their best rendition of old favorites. Grandpa, being half in the bag, would be off-key but then again, we were all a little off-key in our own rights. He would blow into his harmonica and playfully cuss whichever grandchild had left him a slobbery surprise.

Grandma, not one for much conversation, loved playing the piano and singing, her fingers stroking the keyboard like pistons in a well-oiled ten-cylinder engine. It always added such a special touch to the evening. The kids would slowly make their way up from the basement and pull on the pantleg of mom or dad indicating it was time to go. A few snores rang through the dining room as someone would be passed out on the couch not wanting to be disturbed.

The night would come to a close and the busy dead

end street would filter out and recede back into its original shape. The neighbors could give a sigh of relief and allow their lives to go back to normal. At the stop sign, before turning off Bridgeman, I would take one last glance over my shoulder. Seeing the smoke dissipate from the chimney, I would watch the little house on the end take a deep breath and then exhale, allowing itself to settle back into its customary existence. I smile and realize how thankful I am of my family and for the love that lines those interior walls.

From Freedom to Crimson and Blue

Todd Bowlin

Just what is a Jayhawk anyway? For many, a Jayhawk is the mascot for Kansas University (KU) and has been since 1886; it is a mythical bird that combines two birds—the blue jay, a noisy, quarrelsome thing known to rob other nests; and a sparrow hawk, a stealthy hunter.¹ Is there more to this large yellow-beaked bird with crimson and blue feathers, though? Is the Jayhawk more than just the centerpiece and inspiration to the “Rock Chalk Jayhawk” chant that sports fans across the nation know as the KU fight song? The term Jayhawk has existed for over 150 years, and once inspired something that was much more profound and meaningful than just simply the mascot for KU. The Jayhawk once stood for a group of Kansans who fought to keep the state a slave-free state.

I grew up thirty minutes east of Lawrence, Kansas—the home of the KU Jayhawks—in Kansas City, Kansas (KCK). KCK is located on the west side of the Missouri River, and everything on the west side of the river is known as “Jayhawk Country.” Growing up I was taught that nothing on the east side of the Missouri river really matters anyway, because it is Missouri. In Jayhawk Country, one is raised to be a staunch supporter and fan of Kansas Jayhawk football and basketball—especially in my family—and ever since I can remember, the Missouri University Tigers were the KU Jayhawks’ bitter rivals and, hence, my bitter rivals, as a Jayhawk fan.

My earliest and most defining memory of my family’s fan fanaticism was in 1988, and I was not even ten years of age. I remember my parents, uncles, aunts, and cousins all on the couch, staring at the television, giving it

1 “Legend of the Jayhawk,” under “Legend of the Jayhawk University of Kansas,” <http://jayhawks.com/Traditions/Legend> (accessed April 29, 2008).

their most avid attention. I knew something big was going on, and I, like any curious nine-year-old, did not want to be left out. I asked my father what the big deal was, and he explained to me that “our” Kansas Jayhawks had played their way into the National Championship game of the NCAA tournament.

Years later, I would come to understand that the NCAA tournament is a playoff bracket of the sixty-four best college basketball teams in the nation, and that the teams are placed in a bracket according to their school’s national ranking, with the highest-ranking teams playing against the lowest-ranking teams, until there is one national champion. That year, the Jayhawks’ opponents were the Oklahoma Sooners, the Jayhawks’ conference rivals.

Throughout the game, I remember the excitement of everyone around me vividly, with everyone on the edge of his or her seat, eyes glued to the television, not wanting to miss a single dribble or shot of the basketball. By the end of the game when the Jayhawks were triumphant over the Sooners the whole room was so animated and boisterous that the knocked-over food and beers went unnoticed, as “Oh my God, did you see that, I can’t believe it, we’re national champs!” and pats on the back were passed around. Danny Manning and “The Miracles” had made their date with destiny, and that game sparked within me many years of Jayhawk pride and my own fan fanaticism—that is the year that I became a life-long fan. For years after that day, being a fan of my Kansas Jayhawks was all I was. Until recently, when I discovered what a Jayhawk originally symbolized.

Through the years, many people outside of my home in Jayhawk Country have asked me “just what is a Jayhawk anyway?” Until recently, I had no answer for them. One curious day I looked up the word “Jayhawk” in *Webster’s Dictionary* and it of course told of the mythical bird that had a home at the Kansas University as a mascot, and it said that “to jayhawk” is to make a predatory attack

on, or to raid.² The dictionary also gave another definition of something called a “jayhawker.” It said that a jayhawker was a free-soil, abolitionist guerilla in Kansas during the border disputes of 1857-1859 with Missouri.³

These men, these “jayhawkers,” were settlers from New England and members of bands of anti-slavery guerillas that raided and fought against the pro-slavery bands called “Border Ruffians” that were mostly from Missouri, before and during the Civil War.⁴ It all started over the issue of slavery—newly settled Kansans did not want it and slave-owning Missourians did. A good seven years before the Civil War, the Kansas/Missouri Border War was in full swing, and both sides were heatedly exchanging violence over the issue of slavery, which gave way to the term “Bleeding Kansas.”⁵ In Jan. 29, 1861, the Free-Stater Jayhawks won out over the issue when Kansas was admitted into the Union as a Free State,⁶ but later that same year in April, the Civil War started⁷ and Kansas was once again consumed by the Border War—only now as a part of the Union. A regiment raised by Kansas Governor Charles Robinson called itself the “Independent Mounted Jayhawks” (later officially the First Kansas Cavalry and then the Seventh Kansas Regiment)⁸, and they continued the fight against the pro-slavery Border Ruffians.

Many bloody battles were fought over the issue of slavery and many travesties were committed on both sides

2 “jayhawk,” Webster’s II New Riverside Dictionary (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1994), 651.

3 “jayhawker,” Webster’s II New Riverside Dictionary (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1994), 651.

4 “Bleeding Kansas,” Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bleeding_Kansas (accessed April 29, 2008).

5 Ibid.

6 “Timeline of Significant Events on the Missouri/Kansas Border 1854-1865,” under “Missouri/Kansas Border War” Network, <http://moksbn.net/Timetable.html> (accessed April 29, 2008).

7 Ibid.

8 “Legends.”

in the name of war.

During this back-and-forth battle, a band of 400 Border Ruffians on the morning of Aug. 21, 1863, went across the Missouri River the 30 miles, to Lawrence, KS, looking for blood. They looted the town and massacred 150 men and boys, dragging them into the streets, before they carried out their message of blood.⁹

This massacre and many like it—on both sides—had a residual and lasting effect on the Kansas/Missouri border that would be felt for generations.

By the end of the Civil War in 1865, the word “Jayhawk” was associated with the spirit of camaraderie and the courageous fighting qualities that characterized the efforts to keep Kansas a free state.¹⁰ So in 1890, when Kansas University’s first football team was formed and they took the field, it seemed only natural that they call themselves the Jayhawkers.¹¹ Few colleges or universities today have such a meaningful symbol, one so deeply associated with the struggle of the people who founded them.¹²

Today, in this fan-frenzied world of sports, something has been lost, something important, that defined my ancestors and helped shape this great nation. Yes, a Jayhawk is more than just a fictitious bird or mascot; a Jayhawk is more than just a basketball or a football team. A Jayhawk is also a symbol of the ideals that Kansans fought and died for, the right of freedom for all, and the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These ideals are the same ideals that America herself was founded on.

Twenty years after the Jayhawks won their National Championship in 1988, the school had its most successful

9 “History of the Border War 1854-1865,” under “Missouri/Kansas Border War Network,” <http://moksbnw.net/History.html> (accessed April 29, 2008).

10 “Legends.”

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

season—as far as the sporting world goes—by the football team winning at the Orange Bowl and the basketball team winning its first National Championship since 1988. As I watched the victory celebrations of both teams and saw the large yellow-beaked, crimson- and blue-feathered mascot doing the “Rock Chalk Jayhawk” victory dance, I took quiet pride in the knowledge that, unbeknownst to most of the rest of the world, the symbol for freedom had once again prevailed victorious—just as it had over one hundred fifty years ago. I am still a fan of Kansas University athletics, only now I take more pride in what it stands for to be a Jayhawk.

I Ain't No Yeller Chicken

Isaac Searcy

I was about ten years old and my big brother Zeb was about twelve when he shot a fox and it ran into a culvert to die. He peered in and I looked too, he shook his head, and I shook mine. "Ain't no way to get it out," I said. "It's too deep." So we got a long pole and tied a wire hook on the end and we hooked and pulled, but it was no use.

Then Zeb looked at me and I knew that look, so I shook my head again and said, "Uh-Uh! Ain't no way I'm goin' in there." So he called me chicken and called me yeller and he must of knew what he was doin' cause it pissed me right off.

"I ain't no yeller chicken," I said and got me a flashlight and a pocketknife and we tied a roll of wire to my foot and he said he'd pull me out if I got stuck. "I ain't no yeller chicken," I said as I got down on my hands and knees and crawled in that hole and the sides of the culvert were cramped and the air was thin and "I ain't no yeller chicken," I said.

The batteries in my flashlight were weak and the wire on my foot was too tight and I was ten feet inside when suddenly, I saw it, the red furry fox and I didn't know if it was dead but the batteries in my flashlight were so I crawled up and stabbed in the dark with my red Swiss Army Knife and sure enough, it was dead, so I grabbed it by the tail and screamed, "Get me out! Pull!" Because I was scared.

Art Class Overview

Dane Yirkovsky

The following Pencil Portrait Drawings are created by students who have minimal or no prior drawing experience. The classes are taught by inmate Dane Yirkovsky with the Bureau of Prisons providing the necessary materials. The art class curriculum is based on a ten-week course, yielding five classes per year. A student receives twenty hours of credit and is given a certificate upon completion.

During each class, students are to assist each other and are encouraged to participate in the future classes. Artwork is displayed around the institution and the class has become very successful in assisting inmates in discovering their talents and skills during their time at the Federal Prison Camp in Yankton, South Dakota.



Audriana by Julian Lopez



Lola by Tim Schwed



Jadyn Danielle by David Gullledge



by Michael Belieu

Katelyn Jo Belieu
February 21, 2008 – May 14, 2008

In Loving Memory

Baby Katelyn...you were a gift from God, and I'm so sorry we didn't share more together. The Good Lord has reasons for calling you home to Him so soon in your precious life and I'm afraid I don't understand.

The news of your arrival was so joyous, and being your grandfather, a highlight of my life! The opportunity to know you, and hold you in my arms, didn't happen since I'm away right now, but I looked forward to it nonetheless.

From what I can tell, God must have wanted some very special company to be by His side, when He received you into the kingdom of heaven. From the pain of losing you, this is the only comfort I can see, as I also will be able to know you when I enter those pearly gates.

My faith in God is a crutch for me through all my trials, like so many others, but it doesn't stop the human side of me from asking "Why"?

You will be missed, young lady.

I Love You!

Papa Belieu



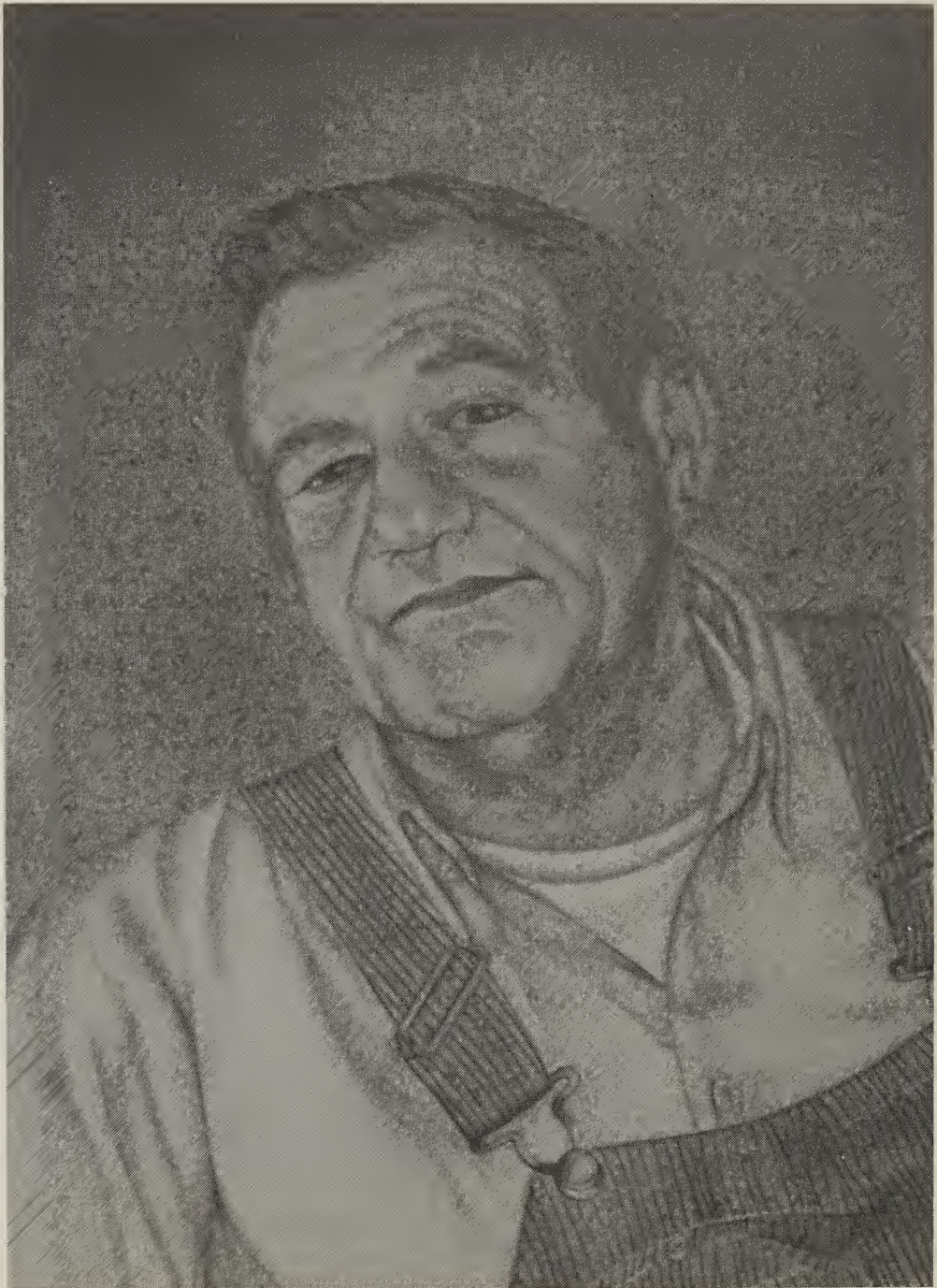
by Dane Yirkovsky

White Baby Kinda Baboon

Dane Yirkovsky

Sasquatch is the stuff of legends, but real hybrids are often the results of inter-species mating and are proven to exist. For example, at South Luangwa National Park in Zambia, Africa, it is found that when a Kinda baboon pairs with a Chacma or a Yellow baboon, their offspring is still a baboon – but it's considered a hybrid. Through DNA research, white baby baboons signify at least one of their ancestors belonged to a subspecies called Kinda. Kinda babies, whether purebred or mixed, are often born white unlike the usual baboon black color. It has been found that mixed ancestry is a common occurrence at the national park.

For more information on this subject and the South Luangwa National Park, see the December 2007 issue of *National Geographic*.



Grandpa Ross by Dane Yirkovsky

Grandpa Ross

Brandon W. Buster

Receiving the call, I rushed to the VA
to be by your side. Several minutes
too late, your heart couldn't take
anymore. The unfairness of
life ever so present as the nurse

held up a hand flailing five digits
in slow motion, indicating our
remaining time together. Through
the glass, she returned to her normal duties.
How could anything else have been more
important? I talked, but got no response,

wondering if you could hear me. My words not
registering as reality reached up and slapped me
across the face. I slowly released your hand
musing over our better days, pondering
my life without you. Remembering those fishing
excursions
where all we seemed to catch was a good buzz.

I vowed to look after Grandma; I knew you would
want that. Exiting the room, I looked back as
the nurse covered your face with a thin white
sheet, denying me one final glance at the
man I have tried so hard to emulate.

* * *

VO5 slicked back his hair.
A Camel non-filter stuck
to his lower lip as his raspy voice
slowly engaged in conversation
out of the left corner of his mouth.

The right side of his face paralyzed from
a shock suffered while checking the
wiring during an inspection early in
his career. Pin-striped Key
overalls were his standard wear—
rolled up at the cuff in response
to his short, skinny, pale legs.
So often I can picture his tan, wrinkled
face with his right eye forcefully closed
his voice echoing with sarcasm; “Boy,
what were you thinking? That’s about the
stupidest thing you’ve ever done!”
Sadly enough, he was always right.

Not a church-going man, but knew
most every passage in the Holy Book.
I can only hope now, his faith
has allowed him to meet the
Almighty and to watch over me.



Morgan by Al Lindsey



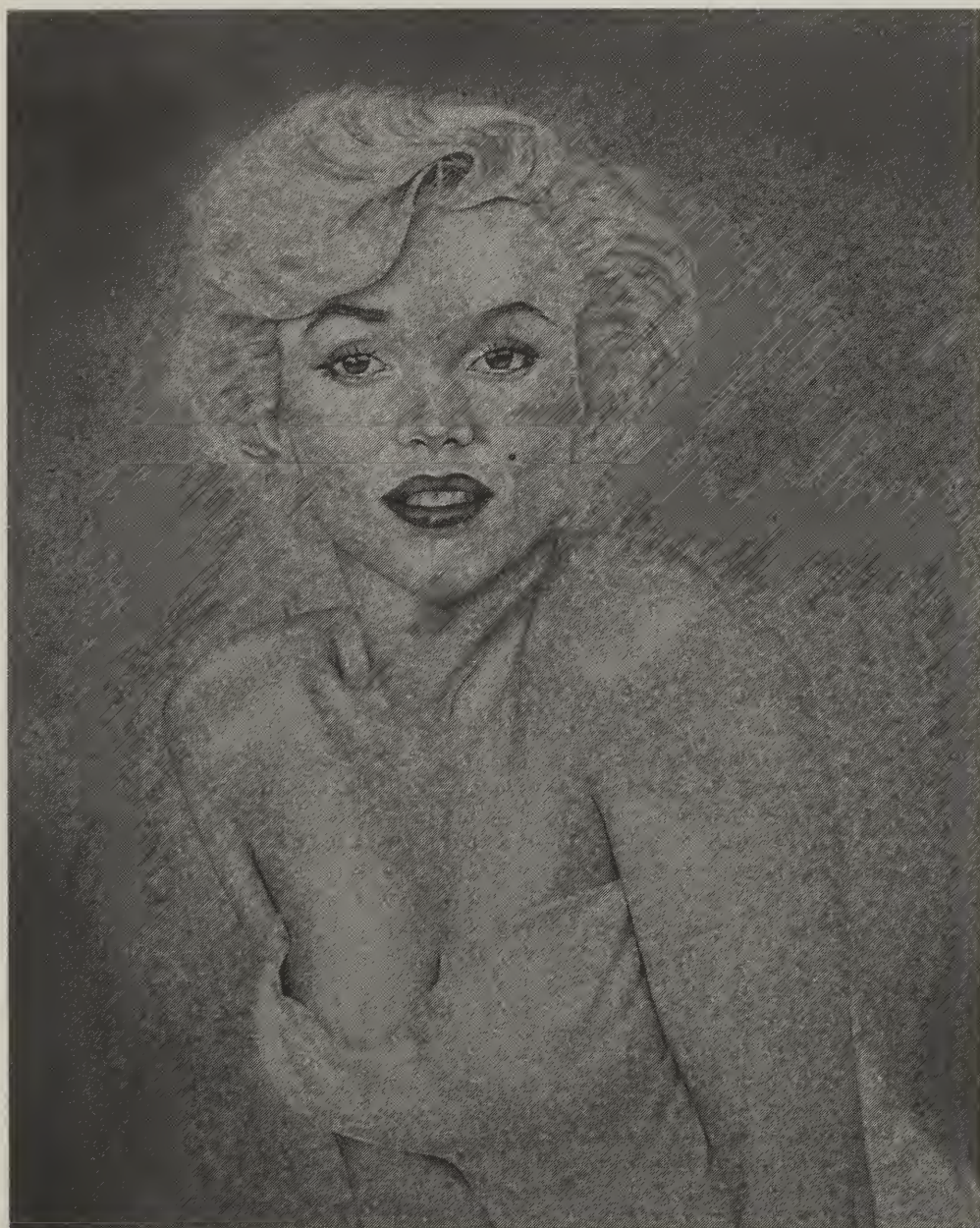
Ethereal by Kerwin Miller



Marilyn Monroe by Roy Miller



White-Bellied Sea Eagles by Dane Yirkovsky



Signature Blonde by Dane Yirkovsky

“My Confidant...”
“My Friend...”
“My Teddy Bear...”

Joe Cavallaro III

Tomorrow is a big day, Mr. Bear.
We're going to see daddy again at the jail.
I feel like a slinky toy, because I can't sit still.
I know we'll be awake for hours tonight talking about the
fun we'll have on the trip tomorrow.
Mommy says it may take all morning just to get there and
we may stop for ice cream, if I'm good!

Remember the fun we had last time?
Want to read my book out loud?
Maybe we should go see if mommy's still awake,
huh?
Do you think I'm pretty, teddy bear?
What if we don't wake up on time?

Daddy will call if we're late because he told me he misses
me!
I miss him too!
He's been away for so long, and needs some sugar hugs
from me!
That's the first thing I'm going to do when we get there!
Yeah... I'm going to give my daddy some sugar hugs, and
tell him I love him...
Because I do!

Are you crying? Don't cry on my dress!
I'm getting sleepy already...
Will you dream the same dreams that I do?
Let's try to sleep, so tomorrow gets here quicker!
See you in the morning!

Good night Mr. Bear.... (Smile)



Girl with Teddy Bear by Dane Yirkovsky



John Wayne by Dane Yirkovsky



Hilary Swank by Dane Yirkovsky

Blank Pages In Prison

Michael 'Mac' Clennon

Why do you stare at the blank page?
Are you looking for a muse?
Gazing off into nothing,
thinking of that girl,
who once smiled at you.
Remembering the way she stretched her arms up,
lifting her pink tank top just enough to expose
her firm flat stomach.
She looked your way,
caught your eye,
and smiled.
Your heart races with primal lust,
sweat dripping— the need for passion.
If only you could find
something to write about.



Jessica Alba by Dane Yirkovsky

From the Inside Out

Count Time. Count Time.

Michael Jackson

As I gaze out my window looking at the pigeons fly by,
my mind begins to wander into the sky.

I sink deep into the clouds, feel light as a feather—
going far away from the barbed wire, and my body that is
captured.

There's a face I see, with green eyes and red lips that are
quivering.
It's Joni, my lady; she's come to put her arms around me.

She gives me a kiss and walks out the visiting room door.
My eyes begin to water as her tears hit the concrete floor.

“Hold yourself together Michael; you can do this.”
Hugs and kisses everywhere as families are being
dismissed.

I rush to the window to get a final glance
of her blonde hair, pink shirt and blue jean pants.

Blue....jean....pants
Joni has me stuck in a trance.

Her voice so sweet, a body girls envy, damn it man I miss
her.
Over the intercom I hear, “Count time. Count time.”

May 25, 2008

Dear Jim and Students

It was a great gift for me to read my poems, along with Ms. Roripaugh, to the students at the Correctional Center.

I don't think that there is a whole lot that I can say that your students don't already know, from their own lives—each of us has his or her own experiences that can be brought to their work as writers.

Maybe what I do know, what it is that I've learned from my thirty-five years of writing, is that writing out your life, or devoting the time to any art or craft, is one good way to help understand your life.

Learning to write well, or to build a fine cabinet, or become a master electrician—to spend the time that it takes to master something else outside of yourself, probably boils down to this—you might come to better know yourself in doing the work. If each one of us knows himself or herself, we will in some sense be connected to all others, and this will make us more human.

So, I applaud all of you who are working on becoming writers or poets or both, because in this way you are each helping to raise humankind itself to a higher level.

Thank you for letting me into your lives for a while.

Sincerely,

Greg Kosmicki

The Light

Mario G. Covington

In the Bureau of Prisons, there are numerous count times. These are times when prisoners are counted in the physical form like a herd of cattle. The way the officers inform inmates that it's count time varies from prison to prison; when I was in Texas, they made an attempt over a muffled speaker by yelling, "Count time." In other prisons, officers personally inform the inmates that it is count time by going from unit to unit. But in Yankton, they use a red light.

When I see it, most of the time it annoys me, it makes me nervous. It's like watching the sun being chased away by the clouds—one then expects rain, or driving down a highway at an abnormal speed only to slow down abruptly by the flashing lights of a patrol car. **The red light is a threat.**

Range four stand up for count.

It shines four times a day. I cannot escape it or shake it. I cannot help but notice it because I feel its presence. It's equal to a fire alarm being activated or a microwave when it reaches zero or a pressure cooker when it has reached two hundred and twelve degrees. **The red light is a conscious warning.**

Count time gentlemen.

When I look up and see it, I try to think of something pleasant. I imagine taking little Mario and Latronis—my sons—to the park. They love the sun and what it has to offer: ice cream, swimming, swings and monkey bars. I think of taking Jasmine and Epiphany—my daughters—shopping and out to eat. They love spending time with me as I do with them. I think of pleasant thoughts of the world be-

ing free mentally and spiritually, where we as a people can wander aimlessly at life as a bird does. I think of life without war, drugs, and death, where we can have peace, love, and eternal life as one under God. I think of Moses, and the children of Israel being protected and led by the cloud.

The red light is the Alpha and Omega of my day.

Lights on, stand up for count.

\$&%@ Love
by Hung Dao

It is tragic to see a forty-year-old man cry as he hangs up the phone and walks away with his head down.

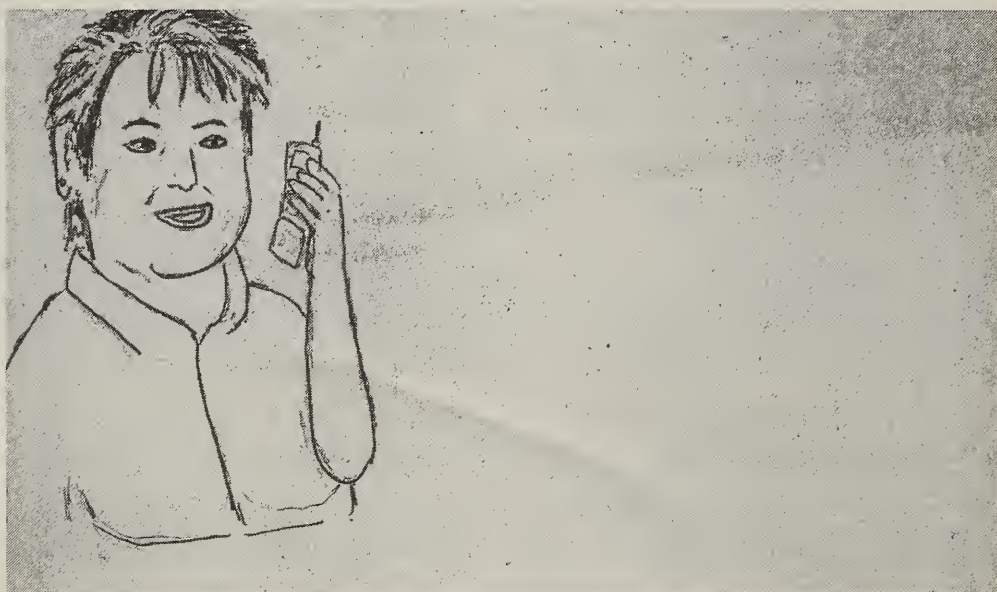


(Ring... ring...ring...) You have a prepaid call, you will not be charged for this call, this call is from.... An inmate at a Federal Prison; to decline this call hang up, to accept this call dial five now, if you wish to block all future calls of this nature dial seven now.

“How are you doing baby, and how are the kids doing?”



“I work three jobs! On Monday I get up at 5:30 a.m. to get the kids ready for day-care, drop them off by 6:00 a.m., and try to get to work by 6:30 a.m. I get off at 2:45 p.m. and then try to get to my second job by 3:30 p.m., during rush hour. Then I get off work at 11:45 p.m. and rush to day-care to pick up the kids who are all tired and then try to get them in bed by 1:00 a.m. Then I have to shower and cook something to eat and make lunch for work tomorrow. Finally, I get to try to get to bed by 2:00 a.m. and then start the cycle again at 5:30 a.m. the next morning. On the weekends, I work at a restaurant from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. That means I have to get the kids to day-care by 8:00 a.m. then pick them up at 10:00 p.m.



“I’m exhausted, the kids are getting sick, the bills are going up, taxes are going up, gas prices are going up, and the mortgage is going up! I don’t think I can handle this by myself much longer!

“I need somebody to help me take care of the kids, stuff around the house, and especially with the bills! I need somebody that can help me right now! I don’t want to leave you, but I don’t have any options,” she said in an exasperated voice and then, the line goes silent again.

“I’m sorry babe, you know I want to be there for you, but I can’t right now. I want to be there for our kids. I

want to be there to help around the house. I want to be there to pay all the bills. But mostly, I want to be there for you!

“You always have an option. My credit is still good. Get another loan if you need the money or use my credit card to pay for the bill. I’ll pay it back when I get out. Sell the cars with gas prices this high: I’ll ride a bicycle when I get out. Sell the house; I don’t need a thirty-eight-hundred square foot house if I don’t have you.

“So what option do you want? Is it money that you need? Or is it that you don’t want to be with me anymore?” Click, the phone hangs up.



I thought I was never going to be like one of those guys talking on the phone begging his wife not to leave him, until it happened to me.



Something I Wrote For My Daughter In County When I First Got Locked Up

Jason E. Davis

Happy birthday little one
eat some cake and have some fun.

So as you turn four and I turn too
please remember dad's love for you.

I wish I could be there for you this year
I hope to see you before your first beer.

All kidding aside, I want you to know
I wish things were different and didn't have to go.

You are in my prayers day and night
I love you Rylie K with all my might.

So a big happy birthday to my little one
eat some cake and have some fun.

Unknown Sentinel

Joshua Harvey

Prologue:

As he neared the ridge, the towers materialized. Like monuments to the gods, they reached, piercing the sky and reflecting the sun's rays. With every step, more detail emerged until finally as he reached the hilltop, Jake could see the taper of the monolithic towers widen until they coupled solidly with the fortress bellow; he had arrived, and it was magnificent.

Standing atop the knoll, the fortress within his reach, Jake paused awestruck; a wave of vertigo washed over him. Beneath his feet, like a psychedelic daydream, the hill flowed into the valley below. Flowers of every color exploded, coalesced, and cascaded into the vast and fathomless moat that encapsulated the island compound. At the center of this, surrounded by battlements reaching fifty feet into the sky, the fortress stood unwavering, a direct descendant of the earth not built but created, an island of solidarity in a sea of chaos.

Taking a breath to clear his head, Jake began his descent down the hill. The flowers and grass waved and seemed to part before him and close as he passed. He felt eyes upon him—not human eyes but the earth's. The feeling increased until he was sure that if he turned his head he would see the ground rising up behind him, like a wave building strength, preparing to devour him and return him to the elements from which he had come.

He stepped out of the field and onto wet sand and pebbles. Approaching the edge of the moat, he halted. As his eyes settled on the water, and its residents began to congeal into solid form, he realized that the dream had ended and the nightmare had begun.

What he saw: monstrosities more grotesque than the strangest creatures in the deepest regions of earth's oceans, their huge jaws protruding with razor sharp teeth tear-

ing, seething deformed bodies writhing, giant prehistoric masses gliding through the water, whip tails circling, and cold predatory eyes searching. This was not the end of his journey...it was the beginning of something different.

Beep beep beep beep...

.... The alarm cut through the veil of sleep. Consciousness grew to awareness, and with that, the realization that it was a dream, the dream. Again it had come, and again he had traveled further. However, it was over too soon; it was always too soon. The night never lasted long enough. The dream never finished.

Enough, the inner dialogue, never far away, emerged like a drill sergeant. "The world waits for no man; get out of bed, maggot." Jake glanced at the clock to his right, stalling and thinking of an argument. He had none; life would go on and he was a part of it.

The phone rang. Jake reached across the nightstand past the alarm clock and answered it. "Hello," he said. He knew who it was. "Jake, honey would you do me a favor," It was Sara. "What do you want," he replied. She sounded so chipper in the morning—he hated that. "O Jake, honey would you bring me something to eat. I was in such a hurry this morning I forgot, and I am sooo hungry." He wanted to ask what time she had gotten home last night. Instead, he asked, "What do you want?"

"O nothing special... just...I don't know, a burger or something. You decide." She knew what she wanted. He was not in the mood to argue. "I'll drop it off on my way to work." "Love you sweetie."

Click. After briefly considering strangling himself with the phone cord, he hung up and rolled out of bed. Padding down the hall towards the shower, Jake noticed the lifeless pictures hanging on the walls, the drab white interior of his home, and the generic clutter of his life. Everything seemed sterile, like a canvas awaiting an artist's touch. He stopped at the closed bathroom door. He turned the handle, his mind cleared; routine taking hold, he en-

tered.

The shower was refreshing. His troubles seemed to float away with the steam. He imagined himself in that far away world. Showering was like dreaming; he could drift away and forget what was on the other side of the curtain. As he showered, he wished that he could be someone else. He wished that his life had meaning and direction.

Jake rinsed and turned off the water. He reached out and pulled the curtain to the side. He stepped over the side of the bathtub and onto the cold tile floor. Reaching for a towel, Jake turned to face the mirror above the sink.

Wrapping the towel around his waist Jake gazed at his steam-distorted reflection, studying it through the condensation congealed into drops as it cut through his visage distorting the image further yet reviling, slice by slice, more of his features. Who am I ?

Elsewhere, above a giant blue globe, a glowing point of light waited as it had done for millennia. It never grew impatient. It observed the continents below, the sea, the blue atmosphere, and the curtains of clouds. It was aware of these things just as it was aware of the many worlds and possibilities that existed beyond this infinitesimal point in the vast arena of the universe. It was also aware that two worlds where about to make contact and that it was to play a part in something extraordinary.

Jake reached across to wipe the condensation from the mirror; the mirror rippled. Jake halted, startled for an instant then thought: get a grip, man, it's just the light playing tricks on you. He forced his hand forward. Reaching the mirror, his hand resisted almost imperceptibly before continuing forward. "What the..." his apprehensions increased, his hand crossed the membranous surface into another world.

The time had come. The glowing form began its descent towards the planet below, falling slowly then accelerating; it entered the atmosphere, the clouds rushed by then broke. The earth began to achieve detail, growing in texture; hills and vales, rivers and streams emerged. Di-

rectly below, the target became apparent as a great structure surrounded by a shimmering lake. The structure grew in detail revealing massive blocks and slabs of rock intricately formed into a majestic imposing structure. Closer still and finer details emerged; brick held together with aging mortar filled the view and suddenly the light decelerated and made contact.

Inside the fortress, the light descended further—at times through solid stone, at others through great open spaces. The levels passed, sounds and smells emerged ...finally an enormous room opened. The luminous presence stopped, again the silent observer; it watched as the scene played out below.

Thousands of candles arranged in descending rows ran the length of the walls. Further in, two half circles of candles served to highlight the action. The players: one seated on a throne shrouded in darkness, the other suppliant and prone before him. The dialogue began. "...they are attempting contact."

Back in our world, Jake was having an interesting encounter with his medicine cabinet. "What the hell," Jake jerked his hand out of the once solid surface. Like a pool of water, the mirror rippled. His hand was wet and cool. He stumbled back, and slipped on the wet tile; his head contacted the towel rack; his eyes blurred, the room began to waver, blood trickled from the base of his skull. Looking out from unfocused eyes, as darkness filled his vision, Jake began to lose consciousness.

Above the cavernous space, the glowing orb waited and watched. A voice exploded from the throne with the force of a natural disaster; the walls reverberated, and the air thickened. It commanded the creature kneeling at its feet to stand. The creature obeyed, slowly and deliberately as if it knew that this action might be its last.

Again the voice flowed, deep and resonant yet less harsh, like a silky rich syrup filling the cavernous space. "You have done well, and you shall be rewarded." A hand

appeared from beneath the flowing black robe occupying the magnificently constructed and grotesquely ornate throne. The hand uncoiled revealing long tapered fingers. They formed into a cup; mist began to swirl within its grasp. The mist solidified and cleared into a perfect crystal sphere. The hand rotated leisurely, and released the orb; it dropped slowly, as through water, to the floor with a solid ringing clink. The dark crystal rolled forward and presented itself at the feet of the now standing creature. The creature twitched as if touched by an electric charge. The voice from the throne spoke: "Bring him to me."

The creature bent, picked up the crystal sphere and raised it to shiny black eyes. The creature inspected the crystal slowly turning it over in its hands, gradually noting every detail. Satisfied, it placed the crystal into a fold in its robe. The creature bowed, was dismissed with a slight nod from the throne, and turned. With surprising speed, the creature dashed through the cathedral towards a tremendous iron door.

The glowing presence descended from the ceiling and followed.

Exiting the fortress, the creature entered a courtyard and approached a pool of water. It produced the orb from beneath its cloak and suspended it above the pool. The orb fell from its grasp. Without a splash, it broke the surface of the pool. A ripple flowed over the surface of the pool. After years uncounted, the portal reopened.

* * *

Peering through watery eyes Jake regained consciousness. He slowly climbed to wobbly legs; cobwebs clearing, he wondering what had happened. Noticing that he was still naked he began to dress. Slowly, dizzily, he attempted to step into his jeans and almost fell again. He thought that he had better sit down and he did.

Sitting on the closed toilet, he pulled on his jeans and shirt. Still dazed but clearing he began to remember the vanity mirror; something was wrong with the mirror.

As he began to stand, he noticed with alarm that that was not the only strange thing happening in his bathroom. The full-length mirror previously mounted to the bathroom door was gone. He stood staring at the hole where the mirror used to be and realized that it was still there, only.... He read an article a while back that spoke of a company that had created a pigment that was the blackest color on earth; he wondered how it had gotten on his door. A crystal ball dropped out of the void and rolled to a stop at Jake's feet.

Still dizzy and confused, now grasping for answers, Jake froze, mind racing, unable to decide on a course of action. Then, as if drawn by a force outside himself he began to stoop, hand reaching toward orb. A shimmering light burst from the blackened mirror and slammed into Jake's hand knocking it away from the orb. He screamed.

On the other side of the glass, the creature knelt before the pool and languidly touched the surface of the newly opened portal. He had dreamed of this day; they all had. A new world opened to them, and he was to be the first messenger. How they would be surprised. Unfortunately, first he had to deal with the human. The other side had been contacting him and now they were attempting to bring him across. A feeble attempt to gain ground. He chuckled. Suddenly a flash of light streaked past him and dove into the pool. The creature sprang to its feet and shrieked a single word, "Sentinel!" before leaping into the pool.

Adrenalin pumping, Jake swung his arms spastically at the flying shimmering ball of light. The sentinel could not yet communicate with Jake but it also could not allow him to surrender to the dark crystal. It dodged Jake's blows, effortlessly buzzing around his head like a horse fly around a hapless swimmer. Jake continued the attack, frenzied arms flailing and whipping through the air, body twisting, backs of legs contacting porcelain, falling....

Finally, his body reclining in the tub, arms spread, legs in the air with the glowing orb hovering peacefully five inches from his face, Jake's fear turned to anger.

Staring at Jake, the sentinel could sense his emotions. Anger was better than fear. Fear could paralyze and it weakened resistance to the crystal. Jake had to react quickly because he would soon to be faced with a choice.

As he struggled to get out of the tub the light bounced in mid air, circled the room, hovered, and disappeared into the mirror over the sink. Jake sat back in shock. Suddenly, he noticed that directly across from him a gruesome arm, like a cross between a silverback and a beetle, had broken the surface of the blackened mirror mounted on the door. Jake's fear returned. He struggled to his feet, keeping his eyes riveted on the hideous birth.

The creature struggled as if climbing up from an abyss, its arms reaching past the doorframe, veins and sinewy muscle visible beneath the dark mottled skin. Jake realized that he was trapped; he could not open the door and there were no windows in the room. A strange feeling began to rise up, threatening to take him into its embrace. Jake thought this must be how animals feel before the fatal blow. He wanted to close his eyes and sleep. A thought broke his reverie. He remembered his arm entering the mirror over the sink and the strange light doing the same. He did not know what was on the other side of that mirror but it couldn't be much worse than what was emerging from this one. Jake made a choice.

Stepping onto the toilet bowl and across to the sink, Jake had the surreal feeling that this was the end of his life. He was correct and as he crossed into the world beyond, his new life began.

Behind These Walls

Michael 'Mac' Clennon

Behind these walls
is a bitter old man.
Every day is the same.
Survival relying on routine.
He has been growing his beard
since the day he came in.
He will not shave
until the day he leaves.
An idle mind
is his happiest time.
Most of the time
he's thinking of a cheating wife; kids
he has not heard from in seven years.
Five years have passed since his mother died
that was the last time he's spoken on a phone.
Everyone is in his way,
everyone is to blame.

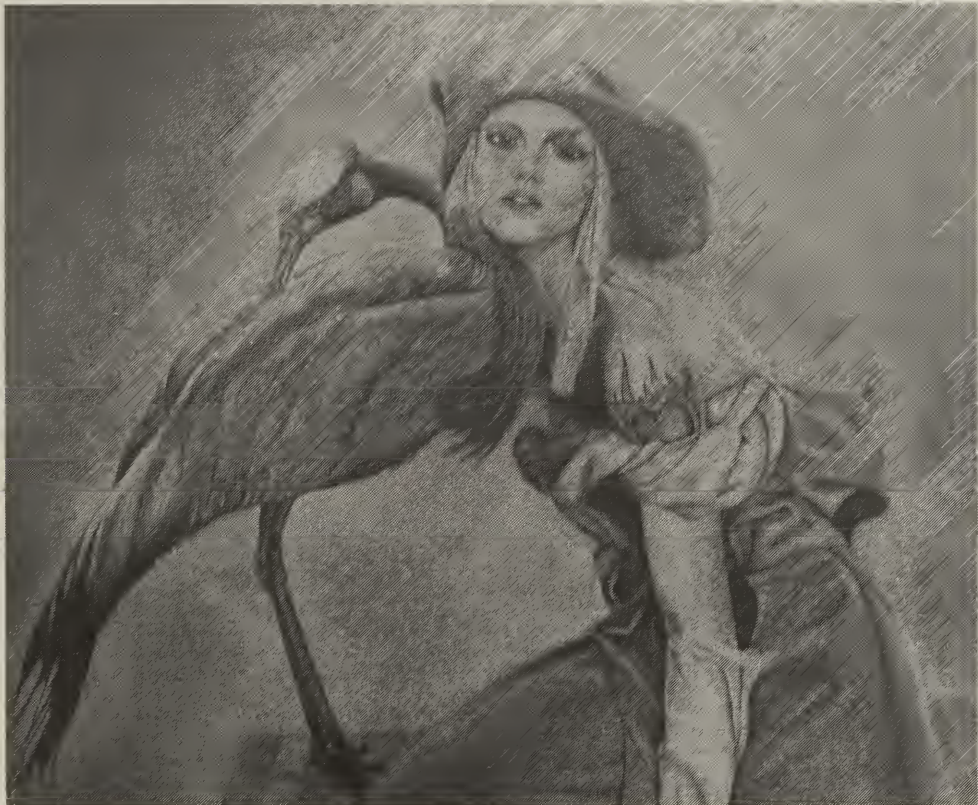
Behind these walls
is a scared boy.
Barely the age of eighteen.
His mind races with questions
fears of the unknown.
Will his girlfriend write to him?
Is she still his girl?
How can he do five years?
A whole lifetime to him.
Here— he is surrounded— he is alone.
Where are the friends he protected?
He holds tears back each night
until the other three are asleep;
then lets them flow.
Only to make himself more frightened.

Behind these walls
is a family man.
Doing a three piece for cheating his taxes.
The voice of his five-year-old daughter
still echoes in his head.
“Are you gonna come home soon, daddy?”
“No, sweetheart I’m not.”
He continues the phone call
with a lump in his throat.
He tells his son
he wishes he could see the big game.
“I love you,” he tells his wife
just as the timed phone call
hangs up on him.
She did not have time to respond,
six days to think about that.
He will call again next Sunday.

Behind these walls
is a street raised young man.
A gangster— mean to the bone.
A haunted aftertaste of childhood
is the fuel for his fire.
A weakness kept secret.
Considering himself king of the streets,
fronting problems by talking tough.
Every day he plans payback
on the rats that put him away.
No plans to change, only to get even.
Using each day of the next twelve years
to develop the perfect revenge.

Behind these walls
four men share a cell.
The four walls contain
Bitterness, Fear, Guilt, and Anger.
So many problems in such a small space.
Each man looks at the other in disgust.

Too busy wallowing in his own problems
to help another— to help himself.
Each one considers his sentence a lifetime.
If they never open their eyes,
and look for answers
It might just be....



Don't Pass Me By by Dane Yirkovsky

Don't Pass Me By

Michael 'Mac' Clennon

How could I keep walking by
when she's looking my way?
Her forbidden innocence attracts me,
our eyes meet.
Connection.
Fixation.
Her purity –class.
The wild rebel she becomes.
Questions,
I don't want answered.
Secrets,
the love she never knew existed;
until her heart was broken.
Her eyes searching
for someone to pacify her pain.
Longing to fly.
Obsession,
grasping my heart.
Lips that say,
“Don't leave me;
don't pass me by.”

Trapped On A Parking Lot

Scott Kirk

It's called a compound
this two-block radius,
but if I were to explain it,
I'd say I'm trapped on a parking lot.

The view is always the same:
green trees, bright flowers, tan khakis.
"Inmates" always coming or going,
the smell of compost from off in the distance.

Correctional officers looming,
resembling security in an airport.
Getting pat-searched constantly,
like I might be strapped to a bomb.

Nothing holding me back;
yet everything keeping me in.
Passer-by's staring from their SUVs and Camrys,
as if seeing a three-eyed circus freak crossing the street.

I'm just a normal person like you,
whose life took a turn for the worse.
Now I'm just trying to bide my time,
while being confined, trapped on this parking lot.

Fearful Mind

Juan Zuniga

I would like to share this personal and fearful story that has been hunting me down ever since I started my incarceration. I believe that this whole thing kicked in when I was at Federal Medical Center in Rochester, MN. I was doing time with a good friend of mine at F.M.C. Rochester when I realized that this whole federal system is a small world, separate from the outside, because the things that happen within these walls—nobody knows about them.

After spending time at the State Penitentiary, coming to a federal facility was not new to me. Prison life—stabblings, fights, and trying to stay alive—was all part of a mind game. In 2000, I arrived at this federal prison, so I had an idea of what goes on in the yard. I thought to myself this is it, another round of rough life for me. But this ride was going to be different; I could feel it, I could almost smell it in the air. I still remember my first day at F.M.C. Rochester.

Upon arriving at this federal prison and walking across the compound to my assigned housing unit, I noticed a bunch of correctional officers running towards another unit where they house the unmanageable people. Right away my mind switched from being a regular guy to a more defensive manner. It is a natural instinct for inmates to act like this. I kept walking carefully to my newly assigned housing unit. The prison had trees, green grass, and a couple of benches for people to sit; it almost resembled a college campus to me. As I was walking to my unit, a couple of guys said “What’s up” to me, and others just gave me that prison look to see how soft I was, but since I was not new to the system, I didn’t pay too much attention to this.

I met my friend “Rob” out in the yard; he was not old, but he looked old, probably because of his illness. He

had a couple of wrinkles in his face, but he couldn't be more than forty-five. Although he had problems walking around due to his sickness, we made it a daily routine to meet in the yard after count. Not only did he introduce me to the game of handball, but we also talked about family matters. He would tell me about the family he left behind, and I would just listen to his stories. After a few months the conversation with "Rob" became more personal. He would tell me how this time in prison destroyed everything he had: wife, kids, and just about everyone he left behind. I would tell him about my life too. One time he mentioned that he was really sick; I mean I knew he was ill, but I didn't know how serious it was until later when I learned that people who lived in this one unit are all pretty sick, and that is where my friend lived at that time. He also said that there was a pretty good chance that he would die in prison. I didn't know what to say to that other than to give him words of encouragement, just like he did for me when I met him out in the yard.

It was weird; I had a feeling that this prison was going to be different right from the get-go. I have been in different counties and state facilities, but never in a federal prison let alone in a federal medical center. Life is depressing in this prison mainly because all the inmates are either sick or close to dying. I felt really bad after he had told me about his illness, and reality set in on me after this conversation. I was thinking to myself what I would do if I was in "Rob's" shoes. I was twenty-nine when I came to federal prison, and to this day I do not know what I would do in a similar situation.

Doing time in F.M.C. Rochester was different from the other prisons. They house these inmates that are really crazy, and they have this floor that is called the "dead alley" for a reason. So imagine dealing with this every day where you see your friends one day, and they are gone the next; it's very depressing.

My friend "Rob" died in prison, and I can only imagine the pain that his family has endured. This is my

fear, dying in prison; knowing that I could be him at any given time and there is nothing I can do about it. I guess it is true what they say, "Only the strong survive"!

June 13, 2008

**To the Students in Dr. Jim Reese's Writing
& Publishing Class, Federal Prison Camp,
Yankton, SD**

First of all, thank you for the many kind words in your letters. Coming to read for you was a pleasure, and I enjoyed our subsequent discussion very much. I truly appreciated your attentiveness, engagement, and numerous well-considered questions.

I noticed in your letters that a number of you had questions, issues, and concerns about subject matter: whether your own stories, cultural backgrounds, etc. would be of interest to readers. These are definitely valid concerns that most writers deal with in one form or another. My advice is that while you want to select and frame the best possible materials/stories from your lives (if, indeed, you want to write from personal experience), it is probably futile to attempt to second-guess too much what will appeal most to a literary audience. Instead of worrying so much about whether your stories are of interest/appeal, perhaps concentrate on the skill and quality with which you tell/write your story. Creative non-fiction writer Scott Russell Sanders wrote an entire book about limestone, and while I think most readers might say, if asked beforehand, that they were not particularly interested in limestone, the book was so well-written that it was absolutely riveting. Furthermore, some of you expressed concerns that your backgrounds and stories might be too strange or unfamiliar for literary audiences. Once again, these concerns are absolutely understandable -- I have them myself -- but I think that you need to set them aside, and simply tell the stories that you feel most compelled to write. I frequently tell my students that I think good literature often accomplishes two completely disparate goals: (1) opens a window into a completely unfamiliar experience

or point of view, while (2) offering something within that unfamiliar experience or point of view that the reader can empathize with or relate to. Sometimes I think the most unfamiliar or unexpected points of view can be most effective particularly if there is something within that point of view that the reader can also connect with in some form or another.

A number of you also had questions about creating sound and rhythm in poetry. My advice here is to always, always, always read your poetry out loud. Read your fiction out loud as well, because you want those sentences to be rhythmically sound and well-formed, too. Learn to listen to your work. Become more sensitive to individual words, to assonance and consonance, to line breaks. Let your ear become an important guide in your writing process.

I was pleased while visiting that you asked about poets to read, and in case I forgot to mention it to you at the time, read as much as you can, and read as widely as you can. Perhaps this is one of the easiest and most significant ways to learn more about writing, and to teach yourself to become a better writer.

Of course, the writing business is extremely difficult and competitive, and I hope our discussions in that regard didn't come across as too discouraging. I think it's very important that writers understand very clearly what challenges they are facing -- particularly since most writers must figure out how they will support themselves financially while continuing to practice their art. But as one of my mentors, poet David Wojahn told me, practicing the art of writing under these numerous types of adversity is "ennobling." I would agree completely, and add that even in the absence of tangible fiscal rewards, the possibilities for intellectual, philosophical, spiritual, psychological, and artistic growth are invaluable rewards in and of themselves. Furthermore, on a more practical level, the facility in written and

verbal communication skills that arises from a sustained engagement with the writing life can be invaluable in any professional endeavor, I believe. And finally, your writing is something that is uniquely your own . . . something that can never be taken away from you.

I wish you all the very best in your writing adventures, and in your lives!

Sincerely,

LAR

Lee Ann Roripaugh

Real

Todd Bowlin

Love comes softly,
love comes quick,
love comes unexpectedly,
and love can be slick.
Love can give you happiness
and love can make you ill,
but love, in the end,
isn't something
you just feel.
When you find who love is—
make sure you show them
you are real.

Father and Son

Hung Dao

Inmates were doing some yard work and overheard a father and son conversation while they were walking by the prison camp, gazing.

SON: Dad, can we go to the park over there?

FATHER: Son, that is not a park; it is a place where they send bad people.

SON: Why is the grass always trimmed; the trees are neat and the flowers are beautiful?

FATHER: Because the bad people cut the grass short, trim the trees, and plant the flowers.

SON: They have a sandbox to play volleyball, a full basketball court, and even a track.

FATHER: Son, if you want to play in the sand, I can take you to a park with a playground.

SON: Wow, is that an obstacle course with wall and poles to climb? They have a monkey bar, pull up bar, dip bar, and they even have a horseshoe pit and a bocce court.

FATHER: Son, you can do all that at the park, they have all that, plus a swing and a winding slide, but I do not think they have a horseshoe pit or a bocce court!

SON: What is that building over there with the big bell and clock?

FATHER: That is a chapel for bad people to go to church.

SON: What is that round building over there that looks like an umbrella?

FATHER: That is a place for them to go eat.

SON: What is that building over there that looks like a dome? Is that a softball field?

FATHER: That is a gym for them to go work out and yes, that is a softball field next to it.

SON: Wow, they even have their own Tonka tractor and backhoe to play with!

FATHER: That is for them to move dirt and snow around or

dig a hole for plumbing work.

SON: What else do they do there?

FATHER: They do electrical work, heating, ventilation, along with air-conditioning, and they even do landscape design!

SON: What is landscape design?

FATHER: It is designing an area with flowers, shrubs, and trees for it to look appealing.

SON: Why do bad people get to live in such a nice place?

FATHER: Yes, it looks like a nice place; however, I do not think you want to live there.

SON: Do they have to pay a membership to live there?

FATHER: No, they just have to break the law and the judge will send them there.

SON: So, did those bad people hurt or murder anybody?

FATHER: No, all those bad people committed a non-violent crime; that is a federal offense.

SON: What is a federal offense?

FATHER: An example would be if I destroyed a mailbox; it would be a federal offense because it is federal property.

SON: How do you know so much about that place and bad people? Have you been there?

FATHER: When you get older, you just know all this stuff.

SON: Well, how do you know all this stuff if you have never been there?

FATHER: Just stop....Stop it right now! That is a prison, a place for bad people and you do not want to live there.

Okay son....

SON: Sorry, I did not mean to get you upset, but it looks like such a nice place to live. I mean they have almost everything there, except for a swing and a winding slide!

FATHER: Okay son. I have been there and it is not a place you want to live; take my word for it because I know from experience.

The Stand-off

Mario G. Covington

During a dream, a distinguished man said to me, “Do you care?” I thought about this unusual question before I answered; then I said, “Yes, I care!” The man then replied, “What do you care about?” I said: “I care about water pollution, our soldiers in Iraq, poverty—I care about life. As I professed, the stranger’s face slowly came into view. It was like reading the letters on the board at the doctor’s office with one eye covered. Suddenly, I could no longer hear him talk, but I could feel his presence. I felt what he was saying. He really wanted to know what I cared about.

“I care about bettering my life while in prison. I care about me. I care about the pain that I’ve caused so many people by selling drugs. I care about the four years of birthdays, holidays, school activities, that I have missed in my sons’ lives. These four years I’ll never get back. I can’t refund them, nor can I make up for them. This time has passed away like a carnival that goes from town to town.”

Now that I think about it, did I really care, about my children, my family? Did I really care about the pain that I would cause everyone? Did I care about this missing void? The more I spoke, the stranger’s face became familiar. I then realized that yes, I cared, but I didn’t care enough! At that moment his face was so close to my face that I could’ve kissed him. I could smell the aura of pain, loneliness, drugs, alcohol, stupidity, and the prison toothpaste. I now saw him clearly in the mirror.

Thoughts from an Imprisoned Father

Mario G. Covington

As I lie on this double bunk-bed, in this sixteen-man dorm room, where it's the size of a master bedroom, or if one breathes everyone smells your breath, I think of the past. I think of that warm June day, a day that has been forever engraved in my heart. Seeing all eight pounds, four ounces of you, when you were born, brought tears of joy to my eyes.

I fall asleep thinking of the first steps you took; how mama stood you up and I called you to me; I said: "Come to daddy," and you wobbled to me like a drunken man, then you fell into my arms. Remembering this moment brings a smile to my heart.

I began to think of your first day of school. Hearing your unstable, nervous voice, as you sniffled out the words: "I...don't...wanna...go!" I remember taking your hand, like I was rescuing a drowning man and I said: "It's going to be all right son, daddy's with you, always!"

I then wake to the sounds of the intercom at six-thirty in the morning telling me that it's time for breakfast. I feel sad and gloomy because I don't get to see your face. I can't walk you to school, nor can I help you with your homework. Most importantly, I don't get to say, "I love you!" My soul feels empty like a pillow without feathers, or a balloon that has lost its air.

Being away from you is a pain that is unbearable. But knowing that you, my son, are always with me—I can sustain through the negativity of this prison life. I can understand the pain of the other fathers that are missing their sons as I miss you.

I can smile upon the late night counts that are done with a flashlight being shone in my face awakening me out of my dreams of you, because I am with you, and you are with me, "Always."

Through the Viewfinder...

Joe Cavallaro III

I see the opposites in behavior
while taking pictures in the visiting room
of this prison camp.
The camera's viewfinder is a porthole to a side
of you I don't recognize.
Here, I see you around the ones you love.
You're a different person than I
know on the yard....
Why?

Your child in your arms, and your
wife's tears on your khaki shirt—
an unusual nervousness about you.
A smile persists
the hours you spend here.
Moments of awkward silence
avoided to bury the thought of
going separate ways again.

The visit ends and you sit there
with a slack-jawed, glaze-eyed look of
a satisfied junkie.
What I saw through the viewfinder
when I took your picture,
I will not see on the yard.

You transform again....

Relapsing with a Photo

Michael 'Mac' Clennon

Digging through a box of old photos
to fill the empty bulletin board resting over my bed.
While flipping through the memories,
I find a 20-year-old staring back at me.
A Bud Light in my hand and glazed eyes.
As my eyes meet the eyes in the picture,
I suddenly experience the same euphoria.
Lost in the flashback— I finally break free.
I turn my head away— trails follow.
I crutch my stance, overwhelmed with
a sensation that has been long forgotten.
I relapse.
A deep breath calms my racing heart.
Voices echo in my head,
“Mushrooms make me yawn.”
Reality crashes upon me,
I am an addict— I am still haunted.

Christmas in Prison...One More Time

Joe Cavallaro III

Three years down, one more to go,
I was told it would be rough, so I'm letting you know.
The first year was slow, it seemed like ten,
my freedom was distant, I couldn't see when.

Twelve months passed, and it still remained tough,
as I counted the days, it was never enough.
I felt so distant, so torn away,
I needed to focus and find a new way.

I began to get busy trying to make do,
missing my family, my time with you.
Reading books and improving my health,
thoughts of a future with possible wealth.

At twenty-four months, something came clear,
the need to learn as my future grew near.
I enrolled in college—a business degree,
children to support—money needed from me.

I'm making improvements and things will get better,
I'll keep you posted with every letter.
My love for you grows through all of this time,
and with help from God, I'll live down this crime.

Thirty-six months, I've counted them down,
eighteen to go in this final round.
Semester break is here and my mind is growing,
its Christmas again, and outside it's snowing.

One more time, I'm reminded inside,
six more seasons to wrap up this ride.
Just stay busy, do well in class,
I will come home, this time will pass.

The man I'll be when I return,
the dignity and trust I'll earn.
Cognitive thinking and the absence of crime,
I'm almost there...Just one more time....

Merry Christmas

A BRIEF REUNION

Scott Kirk

Absolutely beautiful! Pat is tall and slender—
more petite than I remember her. More than five years
have passed since our last encounter.

I'm sure the look of excitement tells the tale of how I've
missed her.

The scene is anything but uncomfortable. Her hazel-green
eyes, tan stomach, soft pouty lips, the curves on her 5'7"
frame are stunning—breathtaking.

Holding her, kissing her, is intoxicating—she makes my
heart sing and ache. Emotions absolutely engulf me.

Her thoughts about seeing me? If you knew her—she'd
never tell.

Overwhelming fear of her answers to the many questions I
have.

I dream of the future—our future.

Can we work things out? Would she try? Could we try?

Scottie wonders what will become of his mother and
father's relationship.

Only time can tell. I pray her love for me returns.

A NEW BEGINNING

Scott Kirk

I picture everyone as they were: a newborn and a teenager.
Nieces and nephews, no more than chest high.
Everyone healthy, my Grandma still alive.
My Dad active, not on his death-bed, emphysema
threatening to take his life.
Myself being a thirty-year-old, still a young adult.
Instead I'm closer to forty, pushing middle age.
My youngest turning six, while my oldest is of drinking
age.
Nieces and nephews have grown like weeds;
still wondering about the uncle they never really knew.
It's all coming to an end; a long road is what it has been.
Looking forward to the reunion, and hoping it isn't
awkward.
I guess it's a chance at a new beginning;
introducing the new man I've become; a college graduate, a
mature adult.
It's almost scary when I stop and think about it.
But it's a challenge for myself, all the same.
A chance to obtain my goals, fulfill my dreams.
To make my family proud, to be the man I should be.

My Mya

Isaac Searcy

I've spent your first six years here in prison, away from you.

But oh, how I've watched you grow, one picture at a time. When you were a babe, I never held you the way your mother is holding you here, her hand on your bottom, your head on her shoulder, looking at the camera, at me.

In this picture you're older. I think you were three. You took a popsicle break from swimming. Your golden-blond hair is wet and stringy, your tongue dyed blue—blue like your eyes and your bathing suit.

This one is my favorite. Grandma brought you to visit. You're five, not yet too old to sit on my lap like you are. We had a good time that day, playing, coloring, and telling stories. Before you left I picked you up, hugged your body and kissed your face. Then I watched you leave.

It hasn't been easy, being away from you. We haven't bonded the way father and daughter should have. We've bonded through pictures, and I know each and every one of them, perhaps, more than I know you. I only wish I could have held you, swam with you, left this place with you, and loved you, the way I've loved pictures, of you.

**Dear Dr. Jim, Joe, Juan, Josh, Hung, Mario,
Lee, Jason, Brandon, Ryan, Justin, Isaac,
Fermin, Dane, and Michael, et al.**

I was delighted with your letters. Thank you. You made my day and gave me the excuse to take a day off and think about your questions. I'll try to answer some of them, using my iron-clad-tentative logical formula of whim, caprice, and energy, lumping them into a squatch whenever I can. If I get overly professional, either ignore, indulge, or forgive me, por favor.

Okay, my beginning remarks will be in reference to your comments or questions on the pig poems. First, however, I want to set the Porcine Canticles in time. I wrote those poems around 35 years ago. I was a young professor straight out of graduate school with a PhD in 17th century British literature, having the beginning of a lifetime love affair with John Milton and *Paradise Lost*. I think those poems represent my alter ego: the person I was, the person I thought then I'd given up to become the person I thought I wanted to be. The voice, then, was a vestige of the past.

Those poems are from the oral, bardic tradition: they are more designed to be heard than read. They have their roots in the most ancient of literary traditions, the narrative. The oldest extant poem we have—and it's one every one of us should read and re-read—is the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. It's around 8,000 years old, and it's narrative, i.e. story form. Narrative poetry, then, has been around over 7,500 years longer than short stories or novels. I took two ancient poets as mentors: Aeschylus—the “Father of Greek Tragedy”—and Homer—the greatest oral poet who ever lived. Aeschylus invented, so we think, the “deuteroganist,” or 2nd actor. Prior to Aeschylus, drama was monologue: a single speaker (or reciter). Aeschylus gave us dialogue, i.e. literary participation. Homer gave us the oral epic, or tales of men and the gods written in the vernacular, i.e.

common speech. I followed the voice and narrative he developed in the *Odyssey*, a tale of adventure, hyperbole (wild exaggeration) and grand lies and humor. The author of the *Odyssey* had spent a great deal of time on a pig farm (as I had in my boyhood)—pigs and swine are omnipresent in that tale. He knew his subject matter and what he was talking about.

Item: for 35 years much attention has been given to the opening poem, “Loading a Boar.” That poem is balanced by the following poem, “Behold,” which is an allusion to Odysseus coming out of the sea with an oar over his shoulder, heading back to his farm, with its pigs. Here the “hero”/protagonist comes out of his shed into an ocean of heat waves with buckets of pig feed in his hands, going out to meet the day, singing. (canticles = songs)

So, I chose an ancient, time honored format: the story-poem laced with character, action, hyperbole and humor, but instead of using Homer’s dactylic hexameter or the iambic pentameter of tragedy (i.e. fixed, regular rhythms), I used the language and rhythm of my subject matter: the somewhat profane, open form vernacular, that I thought matched my agrarian setting.

Many of you asked specifically about my lines and lack of punctuation. I wanted the poems to follow the rhythms of speech and physical work. Because I wanted dialogue rather than monologue, I sublimated my narrator to his friend/partner/alter-ego John. The poems take place as they work, play, and sometimes drink together. Item: during the writing of this book, I began a ten year process of quitting smoking and beginning long distance running. That process is reflected in the poem’s lines. In the early poems, the lines are short—they’re based on breath, and they reflect my lack of breath because I smoked heavily, (three packs a day, thanks to my hitch in the US Army). When I began running and cutting back, the lines grew

longer—to the point that my editor had to make me re-line several of the poems or change the format of the book. So, what I'm trying to accomplish is the creation/re-creation of speech uttered in action. Listen to yourselves in dialogue while working or exercising: sentences don't break with commas, semi-colons or periods, they break with breath. That's what I wanted these lines to reflect. I also wanted the line breaks (and sometimes stanza breaks) to serve as punctuation. Key: my goal was the oral effect, or, creation of audience (i.e. reader) participation. By reading the poems aloud, they are brought to life.

Okay, I've probably belabored the point, so I'll quit there—on that—for now, but will be happy to entertain follow-ups.

Several of you asked about my seven year break from writing narrative work. At the risk of offending, I'll answer. Eight years ago it became obvious who the next U.S. President (and V.P.) would be. There are many of us—many, many, writers—who looked into the future with Samuel Taylor Coleridge's anticipation of "holy dread." I am an animist: I believe the earth is alive and holy. I do not believe the purpose of life is the making of money and accumulation of wealth. I rightly feared that the forthcoming administration would propagate the worst environmental (and economic) disaster in the history of our nation. I fell into depression and my stories—and my humor—left me. The muse who spoke to me insisted that I write poems and books expressing my sacred and spiritual views. That is what I attempted in *So Quietly The Earth* and my new manuscript *Stone Wind Water*. However, we're coming to the end of the nightmare. I look at these years the same way I read The Old Testament story of Joseph in Egypt: 7 years of plenty, 7 years of famine. I celebrate the end of famine by returning to joy: story, laughter, hope.

Specific Questions:

John is/was a real man: John Sims from Yazoo City, Miss. All characters are based on reality—the human mind is incapable of imagining that which it has not directly or indirectly experienced. Most characters are amalgamations, i.e. patchwork quilts from people we’ve known, tossed together, stirred, and reworked.

Advice for young writers: Never forget, reading is at least half the act of writing, and remember what Mark Twain said, “He who will not read good books has no advantage over he who reads no books.” Then Write. Write as much as you can, as often as you can. Treat it like play: we’ll kill ourselves for play, won’t we?
Here’s my translation of a Chinese poem:

Work Song
The plan is the work
The work is joy, play
Wherein reside silence and song
Side by side, lighting the way.

Writing begets writing, and (the old cliché) practice makes perfect. I could go on on this topic for an hour.

What did I mean by “I don’t believe in a God who frowns?” Hung, some people need to believe in dragons and fearful gods. I don’t like Confucius, I’m not at all concerned with judgment by divinity or afterlife—my concentration is on daily generous living: Buddha called it “joyful participation in a world of sorrow.” My god loves joy and laughter.

Yes, Brandon, I had an audience in mind when I wrote these poems (and strongly believe all writers should have an audience in mind when they write). I knew my audience would be small, as we are not a nation of poetry readers. I wanted to expand that audience by showing a few people that, yes, you, i.e. “they,” too can read, understand,

write, and maybe even like poetry. Poetry is my approach to the religion/way of life I've chosen. My goal was/is to leave the world I love a better place than it was when I came to it. If I can leave two readers or poets where before there was one, I have succeeded.

Justin, we all try to write better as we go. We hope we learn and get better with each piece of writing we accomplish. But that can be a curse if we ask too much of ourselves. My advice is to set goals or standards that you are comfortable with. Don't try to write something "great." Instead, try to write something you like, that you can take pride in. Do that and you will progress naturally. The first 8 (or 80 or 800) curve balls you tried to throw didn't move an inch. Then, one day, wow: it broke. By god, it broke. Writing works like that. Keep at it, you'll get better. Life as a whole goes a lot that way.

Fermin, Copper Canyon Press got its name from the Bingham Copper mines outside Salt Lake City. Your Copper Canyon is far more beautiful.

I'm out of paper and out of energy. But: would I come and read my poems for you? You betcha. I'd love to meet you guys. Take good care of yourselves.

Your friend,
David Lee

Unexpected Snow

Ryan Nordstrom

Its back is curved like a rattler poised to strike, but the baby squirrel isn't to be feared. It lies limp, dead, or maybe just playing opossum instead. In the jaws of the larger squirrel turned cannibal or dominant male that looks right and left to protect its catch as it tightly walks along the ledge. It can't be a taste for blood. The little fur ball must have been trying to escape—a sense of rebelliousness. Maybe the larger squirrel was a bad mother out scampering late that arrived home to find her little furry acorn missing. She must have searched in vain to find him not too far away, stuck in a snow-covered lilac bush chattering out her name. She must have found him, taken him in her jaws, and scampered up the drain pipe towards the four-inch gap called home.

Later that day, I found out I was wrong—a bad mother she's not. She labored all day; moving her four precious children one by one back to their birthing place. She jumped the gun—how could she have known? That on April 25th, two hours of sleet, five inches of unexpected snow with thirty-degree weather would have frozen them cold. She labored all day, not stopping to eat, clenching her dependents between her teeth, carrying them back to the front porch eave. A good mother—she was dedicated like no other.

“This is it”

Joe Cavallaro III

For so long, the days have
progressed into years.

A collection of weeks and months
that have given and taken so.

As the minutes tick away today,
I’m anxious.

Joys and fears intertwined so tightly;
I can barely unravel.

Many long term friendships will bridge today,
and knowing some will matter not.

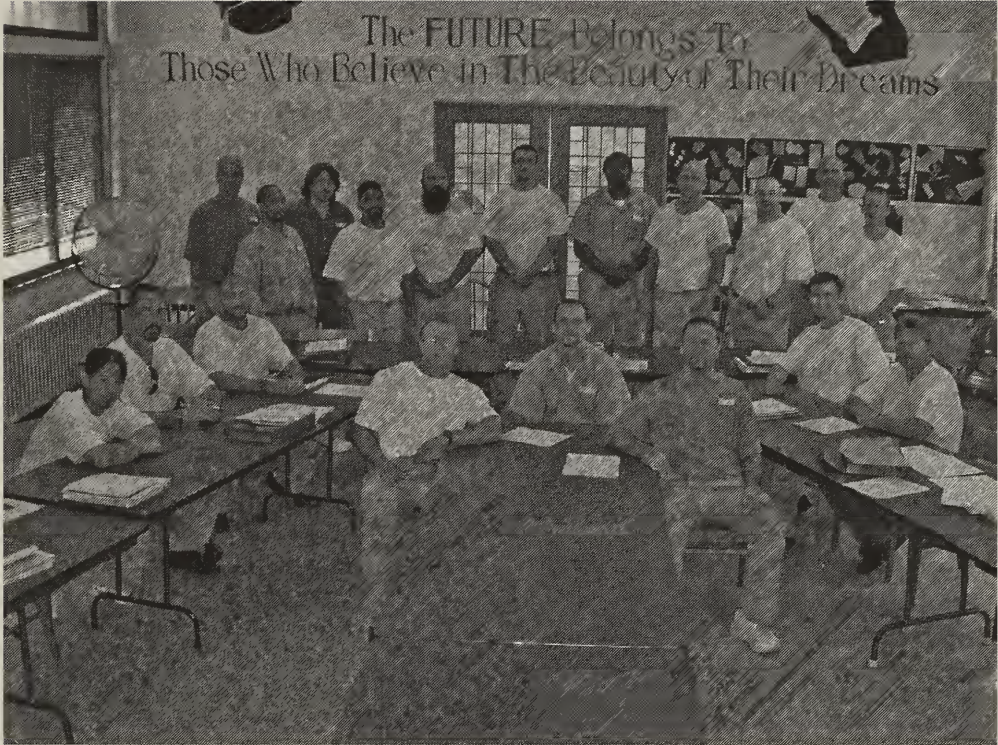
Detaching myself from the reality I know
and blissfully re-entering the society I was
torn from so long ago.

Obstacles to hurdle,
time to make up,
and changes to enforce.

I got this!

Today, after so long, I’m going back home...

Free!



Back Row: Lee Dagostini, Michael Jackson,
Fermin Venzor, Juan Zuniga, Jason Davis, Justin Bollig,
Mario Covington, Justin Brooks, Josh Harvey,
Brandon Buster, Ryan Nordstrom

Left Front: Hung Dao, Joe Cavallaro III, Josh Hurst

Front Center: Isaac Searcy, Michael Clennon,
Dane Yirkovsky

Right Front: Scott Kirk, Todd Bowlin

Justin Bollig is 30 years old and comes from a small town in western Kansas called Hays. He grew up in the Middle East, where Justin lived in such countries as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Dubai, Bahrain, and Kuwait. Justin has attended Fort Hays State University and Johnson County Community College. Justin plans on returning to school upon his release and being the best possible father that he can be to his 4-year-old son Dylan.

Todd Bowlin was born and raised in Kansas City, Kansas. He is the father of two boys, Kavin and Cameron. Currently he is pursuing an Associate Degree in Business at Mount Marty College, in Yankton, South Dakota.

Justin Brooks, Federal Inmate 18195-047, is not just another number. He has acquired an Associate of Science Degree in Horticulture from Mount Marty College in Yankton, South Dakota, and loves telling the stories of his adventuresome childhood. Justin is currently working on a few new stories that carry the same light-hearted tone.

Brandon W. Buster was born and raised in Muscatine, Iowa, a small quaint town nestled on the Mississippi River. He graduated from the University of Iowa with B.S. degrees in Mathematics and Economics. Brandon returned to Muscatine after graduation and started an Insurance and Financial Services business.

Joe Cavallaro III is serving an eighty-seven month sentence for Conspiracy to Distribute Methamphetamine, and currently resides at the Federal Prison Camp in Yankton, South Dakota. Prior to his incarceration, he was active in the workforce as a member of the United Steelworkers of America. His foundry career continued for over seventeen years as a crane operator and truck driver. After entering the Bureau of Prisons, he enrolled in Mount Marty College to pursue an Associate of Arts in Business Degree. As a late bloomer in parenting, at the age of 37

the miracle of having children and obtaining strong family values has awakened his outlook towards the future. He states, “I’m convinced that my mistakes have created the avenues needed to improve my life.” In addition to a successful future, he has plans of assembling a memoir for publication.

Michael ‘Mac’ Clennon is a 27-year-old representing Rochester, MN. He has an Associate of Science Degree in Horticulture from Mount Marty College. Upon release he plans to pursue his Bachelor’s Degree while enjoying, appreciating, and loving life. Mac’s writings are inspired by his environment, family, friends, nature, and life experiences. His greatest influences include: classic literature, film, and music, as well as his college instructors and peers.

Mario G. Covington attends Mount Marty College where he’s pursuing an Associate of Arts in Business. He’s also pursuing a career in writing novels and poetry. He resides in Chicago, Illinois, with his six children.

Hung Dao was born and raised in Stockton, California; he dropped out of high school at the age of seventeen and moved to Lincoln, Nebraska. He worked at Kawasaki Motors Manufacturing plant at night as a powder coating technician, and later worked at his auto/body mechanic shop during the day. Since his incarceration at FPC Yankton, he received his G.E.D. but his intuition keeps telling him that it was just the commencement of his essential education. Thanks to Mount Marty College he received Associate Degrees in Business and Accounting.

Lee Dagostini loves Las Vegas.

Jason E. Davis was born and raised in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. He has one daughter, Rylie K Davis. He is currently pursuing an Associate Degree in Business from Mount

Marty College in Yankton, South Dakota.

Joshua Harvey has an Associates of Arts in Business Administration from Mount Marty College, thanks to the support of his Grandmother Mary Tippit.

Josh Hurst was born in Sacramento, California, but at the age of three he was moved into the rural Ozark Mountains of southwest Missouri. Josh is a proud father of three. He is an outdoor enthusiast and loves to spend as much of his spare time as possible in the great outdoors. Josh is currently enrolled in Mount Marty College where he is pursuing an Associate Degree in Business.

Michael Jackson was born and raised in Los Angeles, California. His family is currently living in North Platte, Nebraska. He enjoys reading motivational and spiritual books in his spare time when he's not working in a warehouse or oil refinery as a boilermaker.

Scott R. Kirk is 37 years old and was raised in Dubuque, Iowa. He is a father of three boys: 6, 10 and 21 years old. Scott received his Associate Degree in Business Administration from Mount Marty College in 2007, as well as a certificate in accounting, office management, and parenting. Scott hopes to earn his Bachelor's Degree in Social and Behavioral Science with the intention of pursuing a career working with juveniles in detention or group home settings; he hopes his lengthy past with the law will enable him to relate to and help kids that are straying down the wrong path in life.

Ryan Nordstrom was born and raised in Fargo, North Dakota. He has received an Associate of Science in Horticulture Degree from Mount Marty College in Yankton, South Dakota. He enjoys writing and has started work on his memoir to be titled "The Mask of Death: A Story of an Addict."

Isaac Searcy was raised on a dairy farm outside of Callender, Iowa. He graduated from Mount Marty College, Yankton, S.D. with an Associate of Arts Degree in Business Administration and an Associate of Science Degree in Horticulture. Isaac often writes of his rural upbringing and personal experiences with the great outdoors.

As a child Fermin Venzor lived south of the Rio Grande with his grandparents in La Paz, a small town in the heart of the Sierra Madre located in Chihuahua, Mexico. He later went to live with his mother in Juarez, across the border from El Paso, Texas. At the age of six he returned to the United States with his mother. He lives with his wife and three boys in Peyton, Colorado where he breeds thoroughbred and quarter horses for racing. He embraces the western heritage and vaquero way of life. He hopes to one day breed the fastest horses on earth and win both Triple Crowns (thoroughbred as well as quarter horse). This is his first published piece.

Dane Yirkovsky was born and raised in Cedar Rapids, Iowa; he worked in the construction field as a drywall finisher after attending trade school. A change in career led him to working in Yellowstone National Park and various ski resorts as he traveled around the country. This way of life—being adventurous, fighting many battles and rescuing beauties—is what made him come alive. In the past seven years he's extended his journey using his talents in teaching Pencil Portrait Drawing classes.

Juan A. Zuniga was born in the state of Texas and lived in a border town while growing up. He is pleased to say that he has been raised with two cultural backgrounds, American and Mexican, which he is very proud of. He is in love with art in general, especially drawing. He is thirty-eight years old and loves tattoos.

